

Malaysia, Singapore & Brunei

Sarawak (Chapter)

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Pages 75

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Coverage includes: Kuching, Western Sarawak, Bako National Park, Santubong Peninsula, Kuching Wetlands National Park, Semenggoh Nature Reserve, Kampung Benuk, Annah Rais Longhouse, Kubah National Park, Bau & Environs, Lundu, Gunung Gading National Park, Sematan, Tanjung Datu National Park, Talang-Satang National Park, Central Sarawak, Sibu, Batang Rejang, Bintulu, Similajau National Park, Niah National Park, Lambir Hills National Park, Miri, Northeastern Sarawak, Gunung Mulu National Park, Kelabit Highlands and Limbang Division.

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Sarawak

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Why Go?

Sarawak makes access to Borneo's natural wonders and cultural riches a breeze. From Kuching, the island's most sophisticated and dynamic city, pristine rainforests – where you can spot orang-utans, proboscis monkeys, killer crocodiles and the world's largest flower, the Rafflesia – can be visited on day trips, with plenty of time in the evening for a delicious meal and a drink in a chic bar. More adventurous travellers can take a 'flying coffin' riverboat up the Batang Rejang, 'the Amazon of Borneo', to seek out remote longhouses, or fly to the spectacular bat caves and extraordinary rock formations of Gunung Mulu National Park, a Unesco World Heritage Site. Everywhere you go, you'll encounter the warmth, unforced friendliness and sense of humour that make the people of Malaysia's most culturally diverse state such delightful hosts.

When to Go

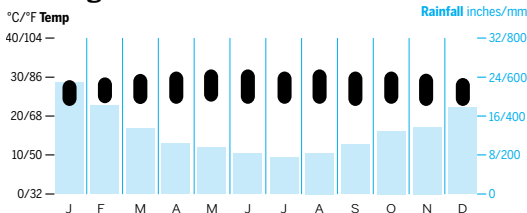
Best Places to Eat

- » Dyak (p392)
- » Top Spot Food Court (p392)
- » Jambu (p392)
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Best Places to Stay

- » Batik Boutique Hotel (p390)
- » Dillenia Guesthouse (p433)
- » Threehouse B&B (p390)
- » Retreat (p413)

Kuching



Jul Dayak bands and international artists jam at Kuching's Rainforest World Music Festival.

Jul-Sep It's tourist high season so book flights and treks early.

Nov-Jan Rough seas can make coastal boat travel difficult or impossible.

SOUTH CHINA SEA



Sarawak Highlights

- 1 Watching semi-wild orang-utans swing through the canopy at **Semenggoh Nature Reserve** (p407)
- 2 Seeing the elusive *Rafflesia*, the world's largest

- flower, at **Gunung Gading National Park** (p413)
- 3 Strolling the Waterfront Promenade in **Kuching** (p382)
- 4 Spotting endangered proboscis monkeys in **Bako**

National Park (p400) or **Kuching Wetlands National Park** (p406)

- 5 Watching the jungle glide by as you make your way into the very heart of Borneo along



the **Batang Rejang** (p421), 'Borneo's Amazon'

6 Experiencing longhouse life and Kelabit hospitality in the **Kelabit Highlands** (p444)

7 Ascending to the summit of Gunung Mulu, the highest peak in Borneo's best nature park, or going spelunking in **Gunung Mulu National Park** (p429)

8 Entering a netherworld of stalactites and bats in the caves of **Niah National Park** (p429)

History

After a century of rule by the White Rajahs and four years of Japanese occupation, Sarawak became a British Crown colony in 1946. At Westminster's urging, the territory joined the Malay Peninsula, Sabah and Singapore to form Malaysia in 1963 (Singapore withdrew two years later). At about the same time, neighbouring Indonesia, under the leftist leadership of President Soekarno, laid claim to all of Borneo, including Sarawak, launching a military campaign known as the Konfrontasi (1962–66). Tens of thousands of troops from the UK, Australia and New Zealand were deployed to secure Sarawak's border with Kalimantan.

Since 1981 Sarawak's chief minister has been Abdul Taib Mahmud, who has frequently been accused of corruption, most recently in a 2012 report by the Bruno Manser Fund (www.bmf.ch/en), a Swiss NGO. Entitled 'The Taib Timber Mafia', the dossier identifies Taib as Malaysia's richest man, with a personal fortune estimated at US\$15 billion, and accuses him of abusing his office to award timber and other resource concessions to family and friends. In the state assembly elections of 2011, Taib's political coalition, the Barisan Nasional (BN), retained its two-thirds majority but is under pressure in the run-up to Malaysia's 2013 federal elections.

KUCHING

POP 600,000

Borneo's most stylish and sophisticated city brings together a kaleidoscope of cultures, crafts and cuisines. The bustling streets – some very modern, others with a colonial vibe – amply reward visitors with a penchant for aimless ambling. Chinese temples decorated with dragons abut shophouses from the time of the White Rajahs, a South Indian mosque is a five-minute walk from stalls selling half-a-dozen Asian cuisines, and a landscaped riverfront park attracts families out for a stroll and a quick bite.

Kuching's other huge asset is its day trip proximity to a dozen first-rate nature sites.

Sights

The main attraction here is the city itself. Leave plenty of time to wander aimlessly and soak up the relaxed vibe and charming cityscapes of areas such as Jln Carpenter (Old

Chinatown), Jln India, Jln Padungan (New Chinatown) and the Waterfront Promenade.

Sarawak's excellent museums are free.

WATERFRONT PROMENADE

The **south bank** (Map p384; along Main Bazaar & Jln Gambier; river cruises RM20) of Sungai Sarawak, from the Indian Mosque east to the Hotel Grand Margherita Kuching, has been turned into a watery promenade, with paved walkways, lawns, flowerbeds, a children's playground, cafes and food stalls. It's a fine place for a stroll any time a cool breeze blows off the river, especially at sunset. In the evening the waterfront is ablaze with colourful fairy lights and full of couples and families eating snacks as trans-river *tambang* (small passenger ferries) glide past with their glowing lanterns. The loveliest panoramas are from the bend in the river across from the Hilton. Several companies offer **river cruises** (RM20). The water level is kept constant by a downstream barrage.

The promenade affords great views across the river to the white, crenellated towers and manicured gardens of the Astana; hilltop Fort Margherita, also white and crenellated; and, between the two, the Sarawak State Assembly, with its dramatic, golden pointy roof.

Chinese History Museum

MUSEUM

(Map p384; cnr Main Bazaar & Jln Wayang; ☎9am–4.45pm Mon–Fri, 10am–4pm Sat, Sun & holidays) Housed in the century-old Chinese Court building, the Chinese History Museum provides an excellent introduction to the nine Chinese communities – each with its own dialect, cuisine and temples – who began settling in Sarawak around 1830. Highlights of the evocative new exhibits, inaugurated in 2011, include ceramics, musical instruments, historic photos and some fearsome dragon and lion dance costumes. The entrance is on the river side of the building.

Square Tower

HISTORIC BUILDING

(Map p384) Along with Fort Margherita, the Square Tower, built in 1879, once guarded the lazy river against marauders. Over the past century, the structure – still emblazoned with Sarawak's Brooke-era coat-of-arms – has served as a prison, a mess and a dance hall; it now houses an art gallery. Nearby Jln Gambier is named after a vine used for tanning and dyeing.

Old Court House Complex

HISTORIC BUILDING

(Map p384; btwn Jln Tun Abang Haji Openg & Jln Barrack) The Old Court House, now officially

called the Sarawak Tourism Complex, was built in the late 1800s to serve as the city's administrative centre. Today, this ensemble of airy, colonnaded structures – well worth a wander – is home to the very helpful Visitors Information Centre and the National Park Booking Office. Out front, across the street from the Square Tower, stands the **Brooke Memorial**, erected in 1924 to honour Charles Brooke.

OLD CHINATOWN

Jalan Carpenter

STREET

(Map p384) Lined with evocative, colonial-era shophouses and home to several vibrantly coloured Chinese temples, Jln Carpenter – the heart of Kuching's Old Chinatown – stretches from ornamental **Harmony Arch** (Map p384; cnr Jln Tun Abang Haji Openg & Jln Carpenter) eastward to **Hong San Si Temple** (Map p384; cnr Jln Wayang & Jln Carpenter; ☉6am–6pm), with its roofline of tiled dragons. Established sometime before 1848 (and extensively restored in 2004), it is also known by its Hokkien name, Say Ong Kong.

There is a big celebration here in April, with a long procession of floats, lion and dragon dancers, and other groups winding their way through town following the altar of Kong Teck Choon Ong (the deity at the temple).

Hiang Tian Siang Temple

TEMPLE

(Sang Ti Miao Temple; Map p384; btwn 12 & 14 Jln Carpenter) Near the Harmony Arch end of the street, this temple, rebuilt shortly after the fire of 1884, serves the Teochew congregation as a shrine to Shang Di (the Emperor of Heaven).

The temple's most interesting celebration is the Hungry Ghost Festival, held on the 15th day of the seventh lunar month (mid-August or early September). The Chinese believe that the gates of hell swing open for the entirety of the month and the spirits of the dead are free to roam the earth. On the 15th day, offerings of food, prayer, incense and paper money are made to appease the spirits. A priest blesses the offerings and promptly burns an enormous effigy of the Hell King in a dramatic bonfire.

Directly across Jln Carpenter from the temple, you can dine on excellent Teochew Chinese dishes at Yang Choon Tai Hawker Centre (p393).

Hin Ho Bio

TEMPLE

(Map p384; 36 Jln Carpenter; ☉6am–5pm) One of Kuching's hidden gems is tucked away on the roof of the Kuching Hainan Association.

Mount the staircase to the top floor (there are clean bathrooms on the 1st floor) and you soon get to a vivid little Chinese shrine, Hin Ho Bio (Temple of the Queen of Heaven), with rooftop views of the area.

Sarawak Textile Museum

MUSEUM

(Muzium Tekstil Sarawak; Map p384; Jln Tun Abang Haji Openg; ☉9am–4.45pm Mon–Fri, 10am–4pm Sat, Sun & holidays) Housed in a 'colonial Baroque'-style building constructed in 1909, this museum displays some superb examples of traditional Sarawakian textiles, including Malay *songket* (gold brocade cloth), as well as the hats, mats, belts, basketwork, beadwork, silverwork, barkwork, bangles and ceremonial headdresses created by the Iban, Bidayuh, Penan and other Dayak groups. Dioramas recreate the sartorial exuberance of Orang Ulu, Malay, Chinese and Indian weddings. Explanatory panels shed light on materials and techniques.

The historic old **General Post Office**, an impressive, Corinthian-colonnaded structure built in 1931, is across the street.

JALAN INDIA AREA

Indian Mosque

MOSQUE

(Map p384; Indian Mosque Lane; ☉6am–8.30pm except during prayers) Turn off Jln India (between Nos 37 and 39A) or waterfront Jln Gambier (between Nos 24 and 25A) onto tiny Indian Mosque Lane (Lg Sempit) and you enter another world. At the Jln Gambier end, shops sell spices in bulk (orange-yellow turmeric, greenish-yellow coriander, reddish-orange chilli powder) – the aromas are overwhelming and exhilarating! Further along, hole-in-the-wall hat shops sell the white crocheted caps (RM10) worn by men who have performed the hajj to Mecca; *songkok* (RM25), the black velvet hats worn by Malay men on formal occasions; and colourful headscarves for Muslim women.

About midway between the two thoroughfares, entirely surrounded by houses and shops, stands Kuching's oldest mosque, a modest structure built of *belian* (ironwood) in 1863 by Muslim traders from Tamil Nadu. Painted turquoise and notable for its simplicity, it is an island of peace and cooling shade in the middle of Kuching's commercial hullabaloo.

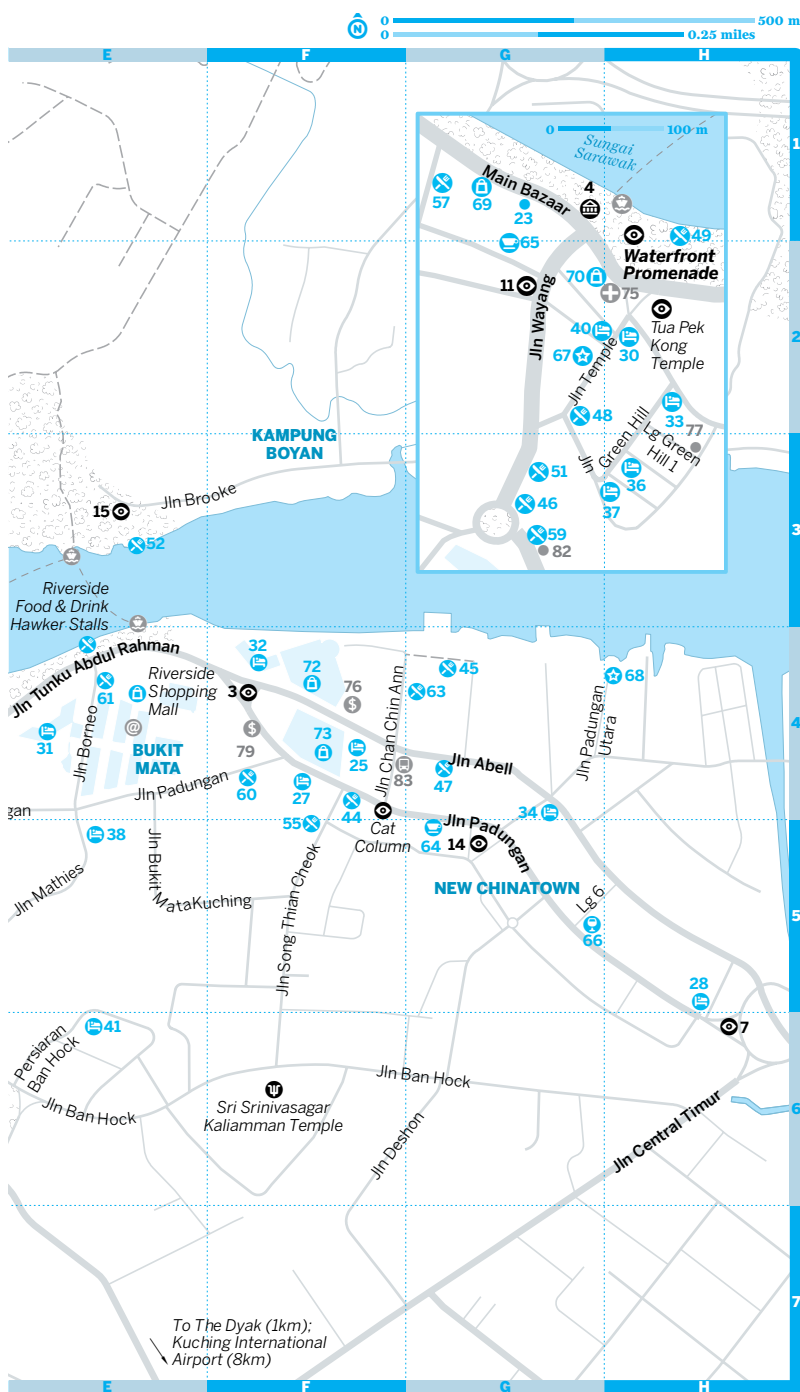
Jalan India

STREET

(Map p384; Jln India) Once Kuching's main shopping area for imported textiles, brassware and household goods, pedestrianised Jln India – essentially the western continuation

Kuching





Kuching

📍 Top Sights

Ethnology Museum.....	B5
Jalan Carpenter	C4
Jalan India.....	B3
Waterfront Promenade.....	H1

📍 Sights

Akuarium	(see 18)
1 Art Museum.....	B5
2 Astana	C1
3 Cat Fountain	F4
4 Chinese History Museum	G1
5 Dewan Tun Abdul Razak	B5
6 Fort Margherita	D3
7 Great Cat of Kuching	H6
8 Harmony Arch	C3
9 Hiang Thian Siang Temple.....	C4
10 Hin Ho Bio.....	C4
11 Hong San Si Temple.....	G2
12 Indian Mosque.....	B3
13 Islamic Museum.....	A5
14 Jalan Padungan.....	G5
15 Kampung Boyan	E3
16 Museum Garden	B5
17 Old Court House Complex.....	C3
18 Sarawak Museum	B5
19 Sarawak State Assembly	D2
20 Sarawak Textile Museum	B4
21 Square Tower.....	C3
22 St Thomas's Cathedral	B4
Tun Jugah Foundation	(see 73)

📍 Activities, Courses & Tours

23 Borneo Adventure	G1
Borneo Experiences.....	(see 40)
24 Bumbu Cooking School	C4
Telang Usan Travel & Tours.....	(see 41)

📍 Sleeping

25 Abell Hotel	F4
26 B&B Inn.....	D5
27 Batik Boutique Hotel.....	F4
28 Beds	H5
29 Fairview Guesthouse	B6
30 Harbour View Hotel.....	H2
31 Hilton Kuching Hotel	E4
32 Hotel Grand Margherita Kuching.....	F4
33 John's Place	H2
34 Lime Tree Hotel	G4
35 Lodge 121.....	D6
36 Mandarin Hotel	H3
37 Nomad Borneo B&B	H3
38 Pullman Kuching	E5
39 Rane.....	C3
40 Singgahsana Lodge.....	G2
41 Telang Usan Hotel	E6
42 Threehouse B&B	C4
Tracks B&B	(see 37)
43 Wo Jia Lodge.....	C3

📍 Eating

44 21 Bistro	F4
45 Benson Seafood	G4
46 Bla Bla Bla	G3

of Jln Carpenter – remains an exuberant commercial thoroughfare. The shops along the eastern section are mostly Chinese-owned; those to the west are run by Indian Muslims with roots in Tamil Nadu. This is *the* place in Kuching to come for cheap textiles.

Sarawak Museum

MUSEUM

(Map p384; www.museum.sarawak.gov.my; Jln Tun Abang Haji Openg; ☉9am-4.45pm Mon-Fri, 10am-4pm Sat, Sun & holidays) Established in 1891, this excellent museum has a first-rate collection of cultural artefacts and is a must-visit for anyone interested in Borneo's peoples, cultures and habitats.

Ethnology Museum

MUSEUM

(Map p384; ☉9am-4.45pm Mon-Fri, 10am-4pm Sat, Sun & holidays) At the top of the hill, on the western side of Jln Tun Abang Haji Openg, the Ethnology Museum (the Old Building) –

guarded by two colonial cannons – spotlights Borneo's incredibly rich indigenous cultures. Upstairs, it has superb exhibits on indigenous crafts, including masks, spears, basketry, musical instruments and a Bidayuh door charm for keeping evil spirits at bay; information on native customs such as tattooing and the infamous *palang* penis piercing; and longhouses, including a full-size Iban longhouse and scale models for other groups.

Downstairs is an old-fashioned natural-history museum whose highlight – remembered with horror by generations of Kuching children – is a hairball taken from the stomach of a man-eating crocodile, accompanied by the following explanation: 'human dental plate found attached to the hairball'. And if this isn't enough to put you off taking a dip in a muddy estuary, the 'watch found inside stomach' (the croc's stomach, of course) surely will – unless

47	Chong Choon Cafe.....	G4
	Everrise Supermarket.....	(see 72)
48	Green Hill Corner.....	G2
49	James Brooke Bistro & Cafe.....	H1
50	Jubilee Restaurant.....	B3
51	Junk.....	G3
52	Kampung Boyan Hawker Centres.....	E3
53	Kok Boon Café.....	D5
54	Lok Lok.....	D6
55	Lyn's Thandoori Restaurant.....	F5
	Magenta.....	(see 56)
56	Magna Carta.....	C3
57	Maria Kek Lapis.....	G1
58	Open-Air Market.....	B3
	Sin Wei Tong Café.....	(see 48)
59	Ting & Ting.....	G3
60	Top Spot Food Court.....	F4
61	Tribal Scoops.....	E4
62	Yang Choon Tai Hawker Centre.....	C3
63	Zhun San Yen Vegetarian Food Centre.....	G4

Drinking

64	Bing.....	G5
65	Black Bean Coffee & Tea Company.....	G2
	Junk.....	(see 51)
	Ruai.....	(see 54)
66	Zeus Sports Bar.....	G5

Entertainment

67	Star Cineplex.....	G2
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68	Terminal One Lounge.....	H4
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Shopping

	Fabriko.....	(see 69)
	Fantasy Sarawak.....	(see 69)
69	Main Bazaar.....	G1
	Mohamed Yahia & Sons.....	(see 72)
70	Nelson's Gallery.....	G2
	Popular Book Co.....	(see 73)
71	Sarawak Craft Council.....	C3
72	Sarawak Plaza.....	F4
73	Tun Jugah Shopping Centre.....	F4
	UD Siburan Jaya.....	(see 69)
	Yusan Padan Gallery.....	(see 21)

Information

74	KK Abdul Majid & Sons.....	B3
75	Klinik Chan.....	H2
76	Maybank.....	F4
	Medical Centre.....	(see 75)
	Mohamed Yahia & Sons.....	(see 72)
77	Mr Clean.....	H3
	National Park Booking Office.....	(see 81)
78	Sarawak Tourism Federation.....	C3
79	Standard Chartered Bank.....	F4
80	United Overseas Bank.....	C3
81	Visitors Information Centre.....	C3

Transport

82	An Hui Motor.....	G3
83	Bus Asia.....	F4
84	Bus to Bako National Park.....	A3
85	Saujana Bus Station.....	A3

you'd like your smartphone to feature in a future exhibit!

Museum Garden

GARDENS

(Map p384; ☀9am-4.45pm Mon-Fri, 10am-4pm Sat, Sun & holidays) The landscaped Museum Garden stretches south from the Ethnology Museum, leading past flowers and fountains to a white-and-gold column called the **Heroes' Monument**.

The cast-iron, open-air pavilion behind the museum houses the **Akuarium** (Aquarium; Map p384; ☀9am-6pm), run by the city, on a shoestring budget, for educational purposes. It houses fish tanks (it's nice to see local fish that aren't laid out on ice, ready to be grilled, fried or baked) as well as turtles.

Art Museum

MUSEUM

(Map p384; ☀9am-4.45pm Mon-Fri, 10am-4pm Sat, Sun & holidays) Down the driveway from

the Ethnology Museum, the Art Museum (Muzium Seni) features sculpture and paintings inspired by Dayak motifs and traditions and by Borneo's flora, fauna and landscapes. May be closed at lunchtime.

Dewan Tun Abdul Razak

MUSEUM

(Map p384; ☀9am-4.45pm Mon-Fri, 10am-4pm Sat, Sun & holidays) Linked to the Ethnology Museum by a footbridge decorated with Orang Ulu motifs, Dewan Tun Abdul Razak (the New Building) has fine permanent exhibits on Sarawak's fascinating history, from the Brunei sultanate through to the Brooke era; prehistoric archaeology, including important finds from the Niah Caves; Chinese ceramics; and colourful Dayak crafts and costumes.

Islamic Museum

MUSEUM

(Map p384; Jln P Ramlee; ☀9am-4.45pm Mon-Fri, 10am-4pm Sat, Sun & holidays) Directly behind

Dewan Tun Abdul Razak, this museum offers a pretty good introduction to Malay-Muslim culture and its long ties with the Muslim heartland far to the west. Displays range from Bornean-Malay architecture, musical instruments and wood carvings to Arabic calligraphy and astrolabes of the sort that helped Arab mariners travel this far east.

NEW CHINATOWN

Jalan Padungan

STREET

(Map p384; Jln Padungan) Built starting in the 1920s, initially with money from the rubber boom, Kuching's liveliest commercial thoroughfare – pronounced pah-*doong*-ahn – is lined with Chinese-owned businesses and noodle shops. In recent years, the area has attracted a growing number of trendy cafes, bars and restaurants. Covered arcades make it a fine place for a rainy-day stroll. It stretches for 1.5km from Jln Tunku Abdul Rahman to the Great Cat of Kuching.

Tun Jugah Foundation

MUSEUM

(Map p384; 4th fl, Tun Jugah Tower, 18 Jln Tunku Abdul Rahman; ☎9am-noon & 1-4.30pm Mon-Fri) Has excellent exhibits on Iban *ikat* and *sungit* weaving, as well as beadwork. Iban women come here to make traditional textiles using handlooms.

NORTH BANK OF THE RIVER

To get to Sungai Sarawak's northern bank, take a *tambang* (river ferry; 50 sen) from one of the docks along the Waterfront Promenade.

Kampung Boyan

NEIGHBOURHOOD

(Map p384) This sedate, old-time Malay *kampung* (village), filled with joyously colourful houses and a profusion of flowering plants, is a world away from the glitz and bustle of downtown Kuching, to which it's connected by boat (there's talk of building a pedestrian bridge). The waterfront area has two roofed hawker centres as well as other Malay-style eateries.

Fort Margherita

HISTORIC SITE

(Map p384; Kampung Boyan; ☎9am-4.30pm) Built by Charles Brooke in 1879 and named after his wife, Rane Margaret, this hilltop fortress long protected Kuching against surprise attacks by pirates. It did so exclusively as a remarkably successful deterrent: troops stationed here never fired a shot in anger.

Inspired by an English Renaissance castle, whitewashed Fort Margherita manages

to feel both medieval-European and tropical. A steep spiral staircase leads up three flights of stairs to the crenellated roof, a great place to take in panoramic views of the river and get a feel for the lie of the city.

To get there from Kampung Boyan, follow the signs up the hill for 500m.

Astana

HISTORIC BUILDING

(Map p384; Petra Jaya; ☎closed to public) Built by Charles Brooke in 1869, the Astana (Bahasa Sarawak for 'palace') – conveniently labelled in giant white letters – and its manicured gardens still serve as the home of the governor of Sarawak. The best views are actually from the south (city centre) bank of the river, so it's not really worth taking a *tambang* across.

To walk from the Astana to Fort Margherita, you have to circle a long way north, around the Sarawak State Assembly.

Sarawak State Assembly

NOTABLE BUILDING

(Map p384; Dewan Undangan Negeri, north bank of Sungai Sarawak, Petra Jaya; ☎closed to public) Inaugurated in 2009, the iconic home of Sarawak's State Assembly is an imposing structure whose soaring golden roof is said to resemble either a *payung* (umbrella) or a *terendak* (Melanau sunhat). The best views are from Jln Bishopsgate and the Waterfront Promenade.

ELSEWHERE IN KUCHING

St Thomas's Cathedral

CHURCH

(Map p384; <http://kuching.anglican.org>; ☎6am-6pm Mon-Sat, to 7pm Sun) Facing Padang Merdeka (Independence Sq), with its huge and ancient **kapok tree**, Kuching's Anglican cathedral (1954) has a mid-20th-century look and, inside, a bright red barrel-vaulted ceiling. The main gate is usually closed, so enter from Jln McDougall, named after Kuching's first Anglican bishop, who arrived here in 1848.

At the top of the hill, on the other side of the new Parish Centre (opened in 2012) from the cathedral, stands the **Bishop's House**. Kuching's oldest building, it was constructed in 1849 – with admirable solidness – by a German shipwright.

Tucked away in a corner of the Anglican compound, behind the Verger's Quarters, is the **Old Anglican Cemetery**, a number of whose tombs – there are just a few dozen – go back to the 1840s. Some are finely carved in granite while others are just weathered wooden planks; several belong to infants.

Cat Statues

It's just a coincidence that in Bahasa Malaysia, Kuching means 'cat' (spelled 'kucing'), but the city fathers have milked the homonym for everything it's worth, branding Sarawak's capital as the 'Cat City' and erecting a number of marvellously kitschy cat statues to beautify the urban landscape.

The **Cat Fountain** (Map p384; Jln Tunku Abdul Rahman) is an ensemble of polychrome cats who pose and preen opposite the Hotel Grand Margherita Kuching. On the roundabout at the corner of Jln Padungan and Jln Chan Chin Ann, the **Cat Column** features four cats around the bottom and four Rafflesia flowers near the top – the latter are just below the cat-adorned shield of the South Kuching municipality. And the **Great Cat of Kuching** (Map p384; Jln Padungan), a 2½m-high white pussycat with blue eyes and wire whiskers, is perched at the eastern end of Jln Padungan, on a traffic island just outside the Chinese ceremonial gate.

FREE Cat Museum

MUSEUM

(www.dbku.sarawak.gov.my; Jln Semariang, Bukit Siol; admission free, camera/video RM3/5; ☎9am–5pm) A veritable shrine to feline kitsch, this homage to the city's name features hundreds of entertaining, surprising and bizarre *kucing* (cat) figurines – some the size of a cow, others tiny, uber-cute and very Japanese – alongside learned presentations on 'Cats in Malay Society' and 'Cats in Chinese Art'. The cafeteria, used by council workers, is quite good.

Kuching North City Hall

NOTABLE BUILDING

Situated 8km (by road) north of the city centre is the hilltop Kuching North City Hall (known by its Malay abbreviation, DBKU), a landmark prestige project – some say it looks like a UFO – inaugurated in 1993. Buses K5 and K15 (RM1.50, about hourly) link the Saujana Bus Station with the bottom of the hill. A taxi from the centre costs RM20 to RM25. If you're going to the Santubong Peninsula by car, you can stop here on the way.



Activities

Satok Weekend Market

MARKET

(Pasar Minggu; Jln Satok; ☎about noon–10pm Sat & 6am–1pm or 2pm Sun) Kuching's biggest and liveliest market begins around midday on Saturday, when rural folk, some from area longhouses, arrive with their fruits, veggies, fish and spices. The air is heady with the aromas of fresh coriander, ginger, herbs and

jungle ferns, which are displayed among piles of bananas (10 kinds!), mangoes, custard apples and obscure jungle fruits. If you smell something overpoweringly sweet and sickly from November to February, chances are it's durian. Vendors are friendly and many are happy to tell you about their wares, which are often divided into quantities worth RM1 or RM2.

At research time, the market was situated on Jln Satok about 1km west of the Sarawak Museum – from the centre, walk south on Jln Tun Abang Haji Openg and turn east at Jln Satok (under the flyover). But there were plans – bitterly opposed by vendors – to move (some would say exile) it across the river to a complex about 2km further west.

Hash House Harriers

FUN RUNS

Kuching's various Hash House Harriers (HHH) chapters hold about half-a-dozen one-to two-hour runs, over meadow and dale (and through thick jungle), each week. For details, ask around or visit www.kuchingcityhash.com, the website of the Saturday afternoon run. Visitors are welcome to join the fun.

Kuching Bike Hash

CYCLING

(www.kbh.doturf.com) Bashers (bicycle hashes) gather every second Sunday afternoon to ride 17km to 25km. Visitors are welcome. Cycling has become hugely popular with outdoorsy Sarawakians in recent years.



Courses

Bumbu Cooking School

DAYAK COOKING

(Map p384; ☎012-897 2297, 019-879 1050; <http://bumbucookingclass.weebly.com>; 57 Jln Carpenter; per person RM150, without market visit RM120; ☎approx 8am or 9am–1pm & 2–6.30pm daily) Raised in a Bidayuh village, Joseph teaches the secrets of cooking with fresh, organic ingredients from the rainforest. At the market you'll learn how to spot top-quality, jungle ferns; back in the kitchen you'll prepare this crunchy delicacy, along with a main dish and a dessert that's served in a *pandan*-leaf basket you weave yourself. A bit pricey but gets great reviews. Maximum 10 participants.



Tours

Telang Usan Travel & Tours

TOUR

(Map p384; ☎082-236945; www.telangusan.com; Telang Usan Hotel, Persiaran Ban Hock) A well-regarded, veteran agency based in the Telang Usan Hotel. Audry, currently president of the Sarawak Tourism Federation, speaks English and French.

Rainforest Kayaking

TOUR

(Borneo Trek & Kayak Adventure; ☎082-240571, 013-804 8338; www.rainforestkayaking.com) Specialises in river trips.

Borneo à la Carte

TOUR

(☎082-236857; www.borneoalacarte.com) A Kuching-based agency offering innovative, tailor-made trips, mainly for a French-speaking clientele, to indigenous communities other agencies don't cover. Amélie, the owner, is known for having very reasonable prices and sharing receipts equitably with local communities.

Borneo Experiences

TOUR

(Map p384; ☎082-421346; www.borneoexperiences.com; ground fl, Jln Temple; ☉10am-7pm Mon-Sat, may also open Sun) Singgahsana Lodge's (p390) new travel agency. Destinations include a remote Bidayuh 'village in the clouds' and an Iban longhouse in the Batang Ai area (one/ two nights per person RM688/888). Also offers cycling tours. Gets excellent reviews.

Borneo Adventure

TOUR

(Map p384; ☎082-245175; www.borneoadventure.com; 55 Main Bazaar) Award-winning company that sets the standard for high-end Borneo tours and is the leader in cooperative projects benefiting Sarawak's indigenous peoples. Known for its outstanding guides.

Adventure Alternative Borneo

TOUR

(☎Danny Voon 016-810 5614; borneo@adventurealternative.com) Offers sustainable trips that combine 'culture, nature and adventure'. Can help you design and coordinate an itinerary for independent travel to remote areas.

★ ★ Festivals & Events**Rainforest World Music Festival**

MUSIC

(www.rwmf.net; 1-/3-day pass RM110/300, child RM55/150; ☉2nd weekend in Jul) This three-day musical extravaganza brings together Dayak bands with international artists. Held in the Sarawak Cultural Village. Accommodation gets booked out well in advance.

Kuching Festival Fair

FOOD

(Jln Padungan; ☉5-11pm for 2 or 3 weeks late Jul-Aug) Scores of food stalls serve the specialities of the various Chinese dialect groups, Nyonya desserts and beer. Held next to Kuching South City Hall (MBKS Building), about 2km southeast of the Hilton.

Chinese New Year

CELEBRATION

(☉late Jan or early Feb) The main festivities are along Jln Padungan.

Mooncake Festival

STREET FAIR

(☉Sep or early Oct) Musical performances and food stalls selling Chinese food, drink and, of course, mooncakes take over Jln Carpenter.

🛏 Sleeping

Kuching's accommodation options range from international-standard suites with high-rise views to windowless, musty cells deep inside converted Chinese shophouses. Many of the guesthouses – a great place to meet other travellers – are on or near Jln Carpenter (Old Chinatown), while the top-end spots are clustered a bit to the east in Kuching's high-rise district, on or near Jln Tunku Abdul Rahman. Cheap Chinese hotels can be found on or just off Jln Padungan and on the *lorong* (alleys) coming off L-shaped Jln Green Hill.

The majority of guesthouse rooms under RM50 have shared bathrooms; prices almost always include a very simple breakfast of the toast-and-jam variety. Rates at some guesthouses rise in July (especially during the Rainforest World Music Festival), or from June to September.

**Batik Boutique Hotel**

BOUQUETTE HOTEL \$\$

(Map p384; ☎082-422845; www.batikboutiquehotel.com; 38 Jln Padungan; d incl breakfast RM250; ☉☎) A superb location, classy design and a super-friendly staff make this a top mid-range choice. The 15 spacious rooms, six with balconies, are sleek and elegant, and even come with iPod docks.

**Threehouse B&B**

GUESTHOUSE \$

(Map p384; ☎082-423499; www.threehousebnb.com; 51 Upper China St; dm/d RM20/60; ☉☎) A spotless, family-friendly guesthouse in a great Old Chinatown location, with a warm and hugely welcoming vibe – everything a guesthouse should be! All nine rooms have shared bathrooms. Amenities include a common room with TV, DVDs and books, and a kitchen. Laundry costs RM8 per load, including drying.

**Singgahsana Lodge**

GUESTHOUSE \$

(Map p384; ☎082-429277; www.singgahsana.com; 1 Jln Temple; dm RM30, d with shared/private bathroom RM88/98; ☉☎☎) Setting the Kuching standard for backpacker digs, this hugely popular guesthouse, decked out with stylish Dayak crafts, has an unbeatable location and a great chill-out lobby. Prices aren't low and the rooms, though colourful, are far

from luxurious, but breakfast at the rooftop bar is included. The shared bathrooms are spotless. Laundry costs RM6.50 per kilo.

Telang Usan Hotel

HOTEL \$\$

(Map p384; ☎082-415588; www.telangusan.com; Persiaran Ban Hock; s/d from RM100/120) A famously welcoming hotel with gleaming tile hallways and 66 very clean rooms that come with freshly plumped pillows and crisply turned-back sheets. The decor is Kenyah and Kayan. Situated down the hill behind the Pullman Hotel, to which it's linked via an often-muddy track. Has an excellent restaurant. Outstanding value.

Lime Tree Hotel

HOTEL \$\$

(Map p384; ☎082-414600; www.limetreehotel.com.my; Lot 317, Jln Abell; d/family ste RM160/390; ☎☎☎) Dashes of lime green – a pillow, a bar of soap, a staff member's tie, the lobby's Cafe Sublime – accent every room of this well-run semi-boutique hotel. The 55 rooms are sleek and minimalist and offer good value. The rooftop lounge has lovely river views. Situated just a block from lively Jln Padungan.

Ranee

BOULIQUE HOTEL \$\$\$

(Map p384; ☎082-258833; www.theranee.com; 6 & 7 Main Bazaar; d RM380-650, ste RM1000; ☎☎) Opened in 2012, this chic riverfront property – in an old shophouse that was completely rebuilt after a fire – has an urban resort feel. The 24 rooms are graced by high ceilings, floors made of rare merbau hardwood, and huge bathrooms with cool, indirect lighting.

Hilton Kuching Hotel

HOTEL \$\$\$

(Map p384; ☎082-233888; www.hilton.com; cnr Jln Tunku Abdul Rahman & Jln Borneo; s/d RM348/371; ☎☎☎☎) The landmark Hilton has 315 spacious, international-standard rooms, in shades of cream, beige and maroon, with flat-screen consoles, LED reading lights and glass-topped work desks. Amenities include two business centres, a spa and a 24hr fitness centre. Wi-fi costs an outrageous RM55 for 24 hours.

Hotel Grand Margherita Kuching

HOTEL \$\$

(Map p384; ☎082-423111; www.grandmargherita.com; Jln Tunku Abdul Rahman; d incl breakfast RM275; ☎☎☎☎) On a fine piece of riverfront real estate, this place will spoil you with a bright, modern lobby, 288 very comfortable rooms and amenities such as a fitness centre, a river-view swimming pool and a new spa. Wi-fi costs just RM5 for 24 hours.

Pullman Kuching

HOTEL \$\$\$

(Map p384; ☎082-222888; www.pullmankuching.com; 1A Jln Mathies, Bukit Mata; d from RM273; ☎☎☎☎) Opened in 2010, the Accor-affiliated Pullman has a soaring white lobby and 389 rooms – in subdued tones of aquamarine, brown, white and green – spread over 23 floors. The focus is on business travellers.

Lodge 121

GUESTHOUSE \$

(Map p384; ☎082-428121; www.lodge121.com; Lot 121, 1st fl, Jln Tabuan; d/tr RM99/129, dm/s/d/tr/q with shared bathroom RM24/49/69/89/119; ☎☎☎) Polished concrete abounds at this mod charmer, whose owners have transformed a commercial space into a sleek, spotless and low-key hang-out for flashpackers. The carpeted, 10-bed dorm room, with mattresses on the floor, is in the garret. All 22 rooms – five with attached bath – either have windows to the outside or wood-slat openings to a hallway.

Nomad Borneo B&B

GUESTHOUSE \$\$\$

(Map p384; ☎082-237831; www.borneobnb.com; 3 Jln Green Hill; dm/s/d/f RM20/50/75/100; ☎☎☎) There's a buzzing backpacker vibe at this Iban-run favourite – guests often hang out in the lounge area with the friendly management. Of the 17 rooms, 10 have windows (the others make do with exhaust fans). Dorm rooms have either four or eight beds. Laundry costs RM8 per load.

Fairview Guesthouse

GUESTHOUSE \$

(Map p384; ☎013-816 4560, 082-240017; www.thefairview.com.my; 6 Jln Taman Budaya; s/d/f incl breakfast RM50/70/150; ☎☎) An oldie but a goodie, this nine-room garden villa, a bit out of the city centre, scores big points with visiting researchers for its unpretentious atmosphere and friendly owners, who run great tailor-made tours.

B&B Inn

GUESTHOUSE \$

(Map p384; ☎082-237366; bnbwsk@streamyx.com; 30-l Jln Tabuan; dm RM16, s/d/tr with shared bathroom RM25/35/45, d RM70; ☎☎☎) Clean and low-key, this establishment has a lived-in, old-fashioned feel and a dozen of the cheapest decent rooms in town. Air-con costs RM5 extra a day. Women and men have separate dorm rooms. A few rooms lack windows. If the street door is padlocked, ring the bell.

Beds

GUESTHOUSE \$

(Map p384; ☎082-424229; www.bedsguesthouse.com; 229 Jln Padungan; dm/s/d RM30/50/70;

ⓂⓈⓂ) In the heart of Kuching's New Chinatown, this spotless guesthouse has attracted a loyal following thanks to comfy couches in the lobby, a kitchen you can cook in and 12 clean rooms with shared bathrooms, nine with windows. Dorm rooms have metal-framed bunks of generous proportions. A load of laundry, including drying, costs just RM5.

Harbour View Hotel

HOTEL \$\$

(Map p384; ☎082-274666; www.harbourview.com.my; Jln Temple; s/d/f RM130/155/200; ⓂⓈⓂ) If it's modern comforts you're after, this 243-room tower, 13 storeys high, is one of Kuching's best bargains, offering full Western facilities for a thoroughly Southeast Asian price.

Wo Jia Lodge

GUESTHOUSE \$

(Map p384; ☎082-251776; www.wojalodge.com; 17 Main Bazaar; dm/s/d/tr with air-con RM20/40/52/75, s/d with fan RM38/48; ⓂⓈⓂ) A friendly, central spot to lay your head. The 18 gleaming rooms (five with windows, the rest with exhaust fans to the hallway) contain beds and nothing else. In an old Chinese shophouse – the lobby still has the original hardwood floors.

John's Place

GUESTHOUSE \$

(Map p384; ☎082-258329; 5 Jln Green Hill; d RM55-60, tr RM80; ⓂⓈⓂ) Hidden away in a commercial building, John's is a neat but rather unexciting spot to grab some Zs. Has 13 simple, practical rooms of medium size with spring mattresses – and without musty odours. The cheaper doubles look out onto the hallway.

Mandarin Hotel

HOTEL \$

(Map p384; ☎082-418269; Lorong Green Hill 3; d/tr from RM55/75; ⓂⓈⓂ) This old-time Chinese hotel is head and shoulders above half-a-dozen similarly priced joints nearby. The 20 decent, no-frills rooms come with windows (no mustiness!), snow-white walls, 1960s Linoleum desks, 1970s-style window-unit air-con and a time-warp vibe.

Abell Hotel

HOTEL \$\$

(Map p384; ☎082-239449; www.abellhotel.com; 22 Jln Tunku Abdul Rahman; s/d from RM111/175; ⓂⓈⓂ) Opened in 2011, this non-smoking hotel helps solve Kuching's shortage of good tourist-class hotels. The 80 rooms are stylish but not luxurious; the cheapest look out on an ersatz airwell. The name – like that of the street outside – is pronounced like the word 'able'.

Eating

Kuching is the best place in Malaysian Borneo to work your way through the entire range of Sarawak-style cooking. At hawker centres, you can pick and choose from a variety of Chinese and Malay stalls, each specialising in a particular culinary tradition or dish. Jln Padungan, home to some of the city's best noodle houses, is undergoing something of a restaurant, cafe and bar boom.

If you'd like to start a good-natured argument, ask a group of locals where Kuching's best Sarawak laksa (a deliciously spicy, tangy noodle soup) is served.

TOP CHOICE Dyak

DAYAK \$\$\$

(☎082-234068; Jln Mendu & Jln Simpang Tiga; mains RM18-30; ☎noon-11pm, last order 9.30pm) Kuching's most important culinary event of the last few years was the opening of this elegant restaurant, the first to treat Dayak home cooking as true cuisine. The chef, classically trained in the Western tradition, takes traditional recipes, many of them Iban (a few are Kelabit, Kayan or Bidayuh), and fresh, organic jungle veggies to create mouth-watering dishes unlike anything else you've ever tasted. Vegetarian dishes, made without lard, are available upon request. Staff are happy to explain the origin of each dish. It's a good idea to reserve ahead on Thursday, Friday and Saturday nights. Dyak is situated 2km southeast of Old Chinatown. A taxi from the city centre – worth every cent – costs RM12.

TOP CHOICE Top Spot Food Court

SEAFOOD \$\$

(Map p384; Jln Padungan; fish per kg RM35-70, vegetable dishes RM8-12; ☎noon-11pm) A perennial favourite among local foodies, this neon-lit courtyard and its half-a-dozen humming seafooderies sits, rather improbably, on the roof of a concrete parking garage – look for the giant backlit lobster sign. Grilled white pomfret is a particular delicacy. Ling Loong Seafood and the Bukit Mata Seafood Centre are particularly good.

TOP CHOICE Jambu

MEDITERRANEAN \$\$\$

(☎082-235292; www.jamburestaurant.com; 32 Jln Crookshank; mains RM28-55; ☎6-10.30pm, closed Mon) Once the venue for elegant colonial parties (check out the photos on the way to the bar), this 1920s mansion – with teak floors and soaring ceilings – is the best place in town for a romantic meal. Some of the tastiest

dishes are Mediterranean-inflected. It has a stylish lounge-bar that serves tapas. Named for the *jambu air* (water apple) tree in the yard. Situated 1.5km south of the centre.

Junk

ITALIAN \$\$\$

(Map p384; ☎082-259450; 80 Jln Wayang; mains RM20-50; ☉6-11pm, closed Tue; 🍴) Filled to the brim with antiques, this complex of chic dining rooms (three) and bars (two) – housed in three 1920s shophouses – is a favourite among Malaysian celebs. The Red Room is amply supplied with pillows and provocatively decorated with risqué pop art. Pasta and lasagne cost RM24 to RM45, pizzas are RM25 to RM39.

Chong Choon Cafe

LAKSA \$

(Map p384; Lot 121, Section 3, Jln Abell; mains RM4-5; ☉7am-11.30am or noon, closed Tue) You'd never guess it from the picnic tables cooled by a fleet of overhead helicopter fans, but this unassuming, tile-floored cafe serves some of Kuching's most famously excellent Sarawak laksa.

Lyn's Thandoori Restaurant

INDIAN \$\$

(Map p384; Lot 267, Jln Song Thian Cheok; mains RM16-25; ☉9am-10pm Mon-Sat, 5-10pm Sun; 🍴🍷) This North Indian place, a Kuching fixture since 1994, sports a huge menu featuring tandoori chicken (of course!) as well as delicious mutton, fish and veggie options (almost 50 of them, including 22 types of *paneer*), all made with top-quality ingredients. Situated 300m due north of one of Kuching's three Hindu temples.

Tribal Scoops

DAYAK \$

(Map p384; Block H, Jln Borneo; mains RM4.50-10; ☉10.30am-9.30pm Mon-Sat; 🍴) A convivial little slice of the Kelabit Highlands in downtown Kuching, this unpretentious restaurant is a huge hit with Kelabit students with a hankering for some home cooking. Specialties include *labo senutug* (shredded beef cooked with wild ginger and dried chilli) and *ab'eng* (shredded river fish). Dishes are prepared without MSG or – because it didn't exist in the highlands in the old days – shrimp paste. A buffet lunch (RM16.50) is available from 11.30am to 2.30pm except Sunday. Situated across the street from the main entrance to the Hilton.

Open-Air Market

LAKSA \$

(Map p384; Jln Khoo Hun Yeang; mains from RM3-4.50; ☉6am or 7am-5pm, some stalls to midnight) Cheap, tasty dishes to look for include

superb laksa (available from about 7am to 4pm), Chinese-style *mee sapi* (beef noodle soup), red *kolo mee* (noodles with sweet barbecue sauce), tomato *kueh tiaw* (another fried rice-noodle dish) and shaved ice desserts (ask for 'ABC' at stall 17). An ideal spot for breakfast before boarding the bus to Bako National Park. Has two sections separated by a minivan parking area. The yellow tower was once used as a fire lookout.

Bla Bla Bla

FUSION \$\$\$

(Map p384; ☎082-233944; 27 Jln Tabuan; most mains RM24-45; ☉6-11.30pm, closed Tue) Innovative, chic and stylish, Bla Bla Bla serves Chinese-inspired fusion dishes that – like the decor, the koi ponds and the Balinese Buddha – range from traditional to far-out. Specialities include *midin* (jungle fern) salad, cashew-nut prawns, ostrich meat stuffed with mozzarella, 'coffee chicken' and homemade cheesecake. The generous portions are designed to be shared.

Kok Boon Café

LAKSA \$

(Map p384; 30J Jln Tabuan; mains RM3.50-5; ☉laksa served 6.30am-1.30pm or 2pm) The three noodle stalls at this ordinary-looking, open-air corner eatery serve the usual Foochow and Hokkien noodle dishes, but it's the scrumptious *Sarawak laksa* that makes this place special for breakfast or an early lunch.

James Brooke Bistro & Cafe

WESTERN \$\$

(Map p384; Waterfront Promenade opposite Jln Temple; mains RM10-39; ☉10am-11pm) Gets consistently good reviews both for the cuisine and the lovely river views. Local dishes such as *Sarawak laksa* and their own invention, wild Borneo laksa, are quite reasonably priced. The beef stroganoff has a following.

Yang Choon Tai Hawker Centre

CHINESE \$

(Map p384; 23 Jln Carpenter; mains RM4-8; ☉24hr) Six food stalls, run by members of the Teochew Chinese community, serve up an eclectic assortment of native bites, including rice porridge with pork (3am to 9am), *kolo mee* (flash-boiled egg noodles; available from 6am to 2pm) and super fish soup (3pm to 10pm).

Green Hill Corner

LAKSA \$

(Map p384; cnr Jln Temple & Jln Green Hill; meals RM3-6; ☉7am-11pm) Hugely popular with locals. Half-a-dozen stalls here crank out porridge, laksa, chicken rice and noodle dishes. The stall run by twin brothers serves superb beef noodle soup (RM4).

Benson Seafood

SEAFOOD \$\$

(Map p384; Jln Chan Chin Ann; 'small' mains RM10-20; ☉11am-11pm Tue-Sun, 4-11pm Mon) In a gritty riverfront area that may become chic in five or 10 years, this open-air pavilion, its big round tables covered with red tablecloths and surrounded by red plastic chairs, serves fresh Chinese-style fish and seafood and Sarawak classics such as *midin* stir-fried with *belacan* (shrimp paste). From the northern end of Jln Chan Chin Ann, turn right along the riverfront for half a block.

Sin Wei Tong Café

VEGETARIAN \$

(Map p384; 9 Jln Temple; mains RM3-4.50; ☉6am-3.30pm; ☎) Does cheap, tasty veggie versions of Chinese favourites such as *kueh chap* and chicken rice.

Zhun San Yen Vegetarian Food Centre

VEGETARIAN \$

(Map p384; Jln Chan Chin Ann; mains per 100gr RM1.70; ☉8am-2pm & 5-8pm Mon-Fri, from 9am Sat; ☎) Serves Taiwanese- and Malaysian Chinese-style veggie meals (eg curries), made with soy or gluten, that are as healthy as they are delicious. Buffet style. Remarkably inexpensive.

21 Bistro

FUSION \$\$

(Map p384; 64 Jln Padungan; mains RM10-48; ☉4pm-2am or later Mon-Sat, food until 11pm) This chic, sophisticated restaurant-cum-bar, popular with young professionals, made quite a splash when it opened in 2012. Serves excellent Western, Asian & fusion dishes, including pasta, grilled meats and fish (snapper is a speciality). As for the soundtrack, early evening jazz makes way for chill-out music later on.

Magna Carta

ITALIAN \$\$

(Map p384; Sarawak Tourism Complex, Jln Tun Abang Haji Openg; mains RM15-28; ☉10.30am-midnight) For great Brooke-era atmosphere, you can choose between the breezy verandah, with garden views, and the interior, whose decor is a mash-up of medieval England and

19th-century Straits Chinese. Good options include pasta, pizza with exquisitely thin crust (RM22), homemade bread and freshly squeezed orange juice. Across the patio, **Magenta** (Map p384; mains RM26-58; ☉5-11pm), under the same management, has a larger selection of meat and seafood dishes.

Lok Lok

MALAY \$

(Map p384; 7D Jln Ban Hock; mains RM5; ☉6pm-3am) This hugely popular nocturnal eatery specialises in *lok lok*, skewers (eg of fish, prawn, cuttlefish or bean curd; RM1.50 to RM2 each) that are either boiled or deep fried and eaten with sweet, sweet-and-sour, *belacan* or satay sauce. Also serves *rojak* and traditional mains such as curry chicken. Ideal for a late – or late-late – meal.

Kampung Boyan Hawker Centres

MALAY \$

(Map p384; Jln Tunku Abdul Rahman; meals RM4.80-16, hawker centres mains RM3-4; ☉evening, hawker centres 11am-midnight) What could be better than a romantic evening stroll along the river accompanied by a bite to eat? Or you can take a ferry across the river to Kampung Boyan, whose new promenade has two tent-roofed hawker centres.

Jubilee Restaurant

INDIAN \$\$

(Map p384; 49 Jln India; ☉6.30am-5.30pm or 6pm) A fixture in the heart of Kuching's Indian Muslim district since 1974. Halal specialities include *nasi briyani* [sic] (rice with chicken, beef or lamb; RM6 to RM7) and *roti canai* (flatbread with egg and/or cheese; RM1 to RM2.60). The cook hails from Madras.

Self-Catering**Ting & Ting**

SUPERMARKET \$

(Map p384; 30A Jln Tabuan; ☉9am-9pm, closed Sun & holidays) An impressive selection of wine (from Australia, California, Chile and France), Western-style snack food, chocolate, toiletries and nappies (diapers).

Everrise Supermarket

SUPERMARKET \$

(Map p384; Jln Tunku Abdul Rahman; ☉9.30am-9.30pm) On the lower floor of the Sarawak Plaza shopping mall.

**Drinking**

Cosmopolitan Kuching has a clutch of spirited drinking spots. Just for the record, Fort Margherita does not serve cocktails.

Jln Padungan hosts a growing selection of cool places to drink – many would not be out of place in Melbourne, London or San Francisco.

LAKSA LUCK

Borneo's luckiest visitors start the day with a breakfast of *Sarawak laksa*, a tangy noodle soup made with coconut milk, lemon grass, sour tamarind and fiery *sambal belacan* (shrimp-paste sauce), with fresh calamansi lime juice squeezed on top. Unbelievably *lazat* ('delicious' in Bahasa Malaysia)!

KEK LAPIS - COLOURFUL LAYER CAKES

The people of Kuching – from all communities – love to add a dash of colour to festivities, so it comes as no surprise to see stalls selling *kek lapis* (striped layer cakes) sprouting up around town (eg along Main Bazaar and the Waterfront Promenade) during festivals, including Hari Raya (Ramadan).

Kek lapis is made with wheat flour, egg, prodigious quantities of either butter or margarine, and flavourings such as melon, blueberry or – a local favourite – *pandan* leaves. Since *kek lapis* are prepared one layer at a time and each layer – there can be 30 or more – takes five or six minutes to bake, a single cake can take up to five hours from start to finish.

Over 40 flavours of *kek lapis* (with butter RM20, with margarine RM10) are available year-round – to satisfy demand from Peninsular Malaysians – at **Maria Kek Lapis** (Map p384; ☎252734; <http://22.com.my/mariakeklapissarawak>; ☀8am-5pm). Free tastes are on offer. Cakes stay fresh for one or two weeks at room temperature and up to a month in the fridge.

Junk

BAR

(Map p384; 80 Jln Wang; ☀4pm-1.30am, closed Tue) Kuching's most stylish hang-out is more than a restaurant – it also has two bars: Junk Bar, tucked away on the side, and the Backstage Bar, lit by red Chinese lanterns and chock full of old radios and musical instruments.

Ruai

BAR

(Map p384; 7F Jln An Hock; ☀5pm-1am or 2am) This Iban-owned bar has a laid-back cool and welcoming spirit all its own. Decorated with old photos and Orang Ulu art (and, inexplicably, several Mexican sombreros), it serves as an urban *ruai* (the covered verandah of an Iban longhouse) for aficionados – local and expat – of vigorous outdoor activities such as caving, trekking and Hash House Harriers social runs. A great place to meet people. Starts to pick up after about 9pm.

Black Bean Coffee & Tea Company

CAFE

(Map p384; Jln Carpenter; drinks RM3-4.80; ☀9am-6pm Mon-Sat; ☎) The aroma of freshly ground coffee assaults the senses at this tiny shop, believed by many to purvey Kuching's finest brews. Specialities, roasted daily, include Arabica, Liberica and Robusta coffees grown in Java, Sumatra and, of course, Sarawak. Also serves oolong and green teas from Taiwan. Has just three tables. Decaf not available.

Zeus Sports Bar

BAR

(Map p384; cnr Jln Padungan & Lorong 6; ☀4pm-2am, closed Tue) Local rock bands strut their stuff from 9pm to 1am on Friday and 6.30pm to 10.30pm on Saturday (after that there's footy on the telly). The upstairs lounge is popular with the golfers. Owned by a

personable golf aficionado – and, yes, although he's Iban, his first name is Polish.

Bing

CAFE

(Map p384; 84 Jln Padungan; coffee RM5.50-14; ☀10am-midnight, to 1am Fri & Sat; ☎) Kuching's tropical-chic answer to Starbucks, this uber-stylish, dimly lit coffee shop serves a dozen varieties of hot and iced Illy coffee.

★ Entertainment

Kuching's after-dark charms range from the sedate (eating well) to the romantic (strolling along the Waterfront Promenade) to the loud and thumping (dancing the night away at a disco).

Terminal One Lounge

CLUB

(Map p384; <http://t1lounge.com>; Jln Padungan Utara, River end; admission free for women and Sun-Tue for men, men Wed-Sat RM35; ☀4pm-2am or 3am) Kuching's most popular dance club and a magnet for celebrities both local and Peninsular, T1 is a genuine, pumping disco, complete with batteries of flashing, spinning coloured lights. Attracts a well-off crowd, mainly over 25 or 30, often in couples or groups. Things really get going at 10.30pm or 11pm and hit their peak after midnight. The dress code for men bans short pants, singlets (tank tops), flip-flops and sandals. Serves finger food.

Star Cineplex

CINEMA

(Map p384; www.starcineplex.com.my; 9th fl, multi-coloured parking garage, Jln Temple; tickets RM5-9; ☀1st/last screenings at about noon/midnight) For a couple of hours of escapism – ideal on a rainy day – courtesy of Hollywood or the cinema industries of eastern Asia. Most films

are English; the rest have English subtitles. The elevator/lift is directly across Jln Temple from the Wong Eye Clinic & Surgery.



Shopping

If it's traditional Borneo arts and crafts you're after, then you've come to the right place – Kuching is the best shopping spot on the island for collectors and cultural enthusiasts. Don't expect many bargains, but don't be afraid to negotiate either – there's plenty to choose from, and the quality varies as much as the price. Dubiously 'aged' items are common, so be sure to spend some time browsing to familiarise yourself with prices and range.

For insights into Sarawak's varied and rich handicrafts traditions, stop by the Sarawak Museum, the Textile Museum and the Tun Jugah Foundation and check out the website of the Kuching-based NGO **Crafthub** (www.crafthub.com.my), where you can download copies of *Crafts*, a quarterly magazine published for the Sarawak Craft Council.

Most of Kuching's shops are closed on Sunday.

Main Bazaar

HANDICRAFTS

(Map p384; Main Bazaar; ☺some shops closed Sun) The row of old shophouses facing the Waterfront Promenade is chock full of handicrafts shops, some outfitted like art galleries, others with more of a 'garage sale' appeal, yet others (especially along the Main Bazaar's western section) stocking little more than kitschy-cute cat souvenirs. Handmade items worth seeing (if not purchasing), many from the highlands of Kalimantan, include hand-woven textiles and baskets, masks, drums, brass gongs, statues (up to 2m high!), beaded headdresses, swords, spears, painted shields and cannons from Brunei. At many places, staff enjoy explaining the origin and use of each item.

UD Siburan Jaya

FOOD

(Map p384; 66 Main Bazaar; ☺8.30am-9pm Mon-Sat, 9.30-5pm Sun) Has an excellent selection of Sarawakian specialities such as pepper (black and white), laksa paste, sambal, Bario rice and even tax-paid *tuak* (Dayak rice wine).

Fabriko

CLOTHING

(Map p384; 56 Main Bazaar; ☺9am-5pm Mon-Sat) This fine little boutique has a well-chosen selection of made-in-Sarawak fabrics and clothing in both traditional and modern

Orang Ulu-inspired designs, including silk sarongs and men's batik shirts.

Nelson's Gallery

ART

(Map p384; 54 Main Bazaar; ☺9am-5pm) Upstairs, artist Narong Daun patiently creates vibrant, jungle-themed batik paintings on silk.

Fantasy Sarawak

CLOTHING

(Map p384; 70 Main Bazaar; ☺10am-7pm) Has Sarawak's classiest collection of T-shirts.

Sarawak Craft Council

HANDICRAFTS

(Map p384; cnr Jln Tun Abang Haji Openg & Jln India; ☺9am-4.30pm Mon-Fri) Run by a non-profit government agency, this two-storey shop has a pretty good selection of Malay, Bidayuh, Iban and Orang Ulu handicrafts – check out the cowboy hats made entirely of bark and the conical *terendak* (Melanau hats). Housed in the Round Tower, constructed in 1886 and used by the dreaded Kempeitai (Japanese military police) during the occupation, which is why some locals believe it's haunted.

Tanoti

WEAVING

(56 Jln Tabuan; ☺8am-6pm, closed public holidays) Using the supplementary weft technique (in which designs are woven into the fabric as it's made), a dozen women hand-weave silk shawls (RM400 to RM2000), wedding veils and the like. Designs at this not-for-profit studio are both Bornean-traditional and modern.

Yusan Padan Gallery

ART

(Map p384; Sarakraf, Waterfront Promenade; ☺9.30am-4.30pm Mon-Sat) Sells crafts and fine art by Dayak artisans and artists. Occupies the historic Square Tower.

Mohamed Yahia & Sons

BOOKS

(Map p384; ☎082-416928; Basement, Sarawak Plaza, Jln Tunku Abdul Rahman; ☺10am-9pm) Specialises in English-language books on Borneo, including the four-volume *Encyclopaedia of Iban Studies*. Also carries Sarawak maps and guidebooks.

Popular Book Co

BOOKS

(Map p384; Level 3, Tun Jugah Shopping Centre, 18 Jln Tunku Abdul Rahman; ☺10am-9.30pm) A capacious modern bookshop with a big selection of English titles, including works by local authors, and guidebooks.

Information

Kuching has Indonesian and Bruneian consulates and honorary consuls representing Australia and the UK.

Dangers & Annoyances

There have recently been incidents of bag snatching from tourists (mainly women) by motorbike-mounted miscreants. Exercise reasonable caution when walking along deserted stretches of road (eg Jln Reservoir and Jln Tabuan), especially after dark.

Emergency

Police, Ambulance & Fire (☎999)

Internet Access

Cyber City (Ground fl, Block D, Taman Sri Sarawak; 1st/2nd hr RM4/3; ☎10am-11pm Mon-Sat, 11am-11pm Sun & holidays) Hidden away behind the Riverside Complex shopping mall on Jln Tunku Abdul Rahman – to get there, exit the mall on the '2nd floor' and walk up the hill.

Laundry

Most hotels have pricey laundry services with per-piece rates, but some guesthouses let you do your washing for just RM5 to RM8 per load, including drying.

Mr Clean (Map p384; ☎082-246424; Lorong Green Hill 1; per kg RM8, 4hr service RM12; ☎8am-6pm Mon-Sat, to 3pm Sun & holidays) A central, reliable place to have your clothes washed.

Medical Services

Kuching has some first-rate but affordable medical facilities – some of the doctors are UK- and US-certified – so it's no surprise that 'medical tourism', especially from Indonesia, is on the rise. For minor ailments, guesthouses and hotels can refer you to a general practitioner, who may be willing to make a house call.

Klinik Chan (Map p384; ☎082-240307; 98 Main Bazaar; ☎8am-noon & 2-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-noon Sat, Sun & holidays) Conveniently central. A consultation for a minor ailment costs RM30 to RM35.

Normah Medical Specialist Centre (☎082-440055, emergency 311 999; www.normah.com.my; Jln Tun Abdul Rahman, Petra Jaya; ☎emergency 24hr, clinics 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, to 1pm Sat) Considered Kuching's best private hospital by many expats. Has a 24-hour ambulance. Situated north of the river, about 6km by road from the centre. Served by the same buses as Bako National Park.

Sarawak General Hospital (Hospital Umum Sarawak; ☎082-276666; http://hus.moh.gov.my/v3; Jln Hospital; ☎24hr) Kuching's large public hospital has modern facilities and remarkably reasonable rates but is often overcrowded. Situated about 2km south of the centre along Jln Tun Abang Haji Openg. To get there, take bus 2, K6, K8, K9 or K18.

Timberland Medical Centre (☎082-234466, emergency 234 991; www.timberlandmedical.com; Jln Rock, Mile 2-1/2; ☎emergency 24hr) A private hospital with highly qualified staff. Has a 24-hour ambulance. Situated 5km south of the centre along Jln Tun Abang Haji Openg and Jln Rock.

Money

The majority of Kuching's banks and ATMs are on or near the Cat Fountain on Jln Tunku Abdul Rahman. If you need to change cash or travellers cheques, money changers are a better bet than banks, which often aren't keen on handling cash (especially banknotes with certain serial numbers – go figure!) – and US\$100 bills.

KK Abdul Majid & Sons (Map p384; 45 Jln India; ☎9am-6pm Mon-Sat, 9am-3pm Sun) A licensed money changer dealing in cash only.

Maybank (Map p384; Jln Tunku Abdul Rahman; ☎9.15am-4.30pm Mon-Thu, to 4pm Fri) Has an ATM. Situated on the corner near KFC.

Mohamed Yahia & Sons (Map p384; Basement, Sarawak Plaza, Jln Tunku Abdul Rahman; ☎10am-9pm) No commission, good rates and accepts over 30 currencies (including US\$100 bills), as well as travellers cheques in US dollars, euros, Australian dollars and pounds sterling. Situated inside the bookshop.

United Overseas Bank (Map p384; 2 Main Bazaar; ☎9.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri) Has a 24-hour ATM around the corner on Jln Tun Abang Haji Openg.

Police

Central Police Station (Balai Polis Sentral; ☎082-244444; 2 Jln Khoo Hun Yeang; ☎24hr) In a blue-and-white building constructed in 1931.

Tourist Police (☎082-250522; Waterfront Promenade; ☎8am-midnight) Most of the officers speak English. The pavilion is across the street from 96 Main Bazaar.

Post

Main Post Office (Jln Tun Abang Haji Openg; ☎8am-4.30pm Mon-Sat, closed 1st Sat of month)

Tourist Information

National Park Booking Office (Map p384; ☎082-248088; www.sarawakforestry.com; Sarawak Tourism Complex, Jln Tun Abang Haji Openg; ☎8am-5pm Mon-Fri) Sells brochures on each of Sarawak's national parks and can supply the latest news flash on Rafflesia sightings. Telephone enquiries are not only welcomed but patiently answered. Bookings for accommodation at Bako, Gunung Gading and Kubah National Parks and the Matang Wildlife Centre can be made in person, by phone or via http://ebooking.com.my. Situated next door to the Visitors Information Centre.

Visa Department (Bahagian Visa; ☎082-245661; www.imi.gov.my; 2nd fl, Bangunan Sultan Iskandar, Kompleks Pejabat Persekutuan, cnr Jln Tun Razak & Jln Simpang Tiga; ☎8am-5pm Mon-Thu, 8-11.45am & 2.15-5pm Fri) Situated in a 17-storey federal office building about 3km south of the centre (along Jln Tabuan). Served by City Public Link buses K8 or K11, which run every half-hour or so. A taxi from the centre costs RM15.

Visitors Information Centre (Map p384; ☎082-410942, 082-410944; www.sarawaktourism.com; Jln Tun Abang Haji Openg, Sarawak Tourism Complex; ☎8am-5pm Mon-Fri) Located in the atmospheric old courthouse complex, this office has helpful and well-informed staff, lots of brochures (including the useful *Kuching Visitors Guide*) and oodles of practical information (eg bus schedules), much of it on bulletin boards.

Sarawak Tourism Federation (Map p384; ☎082-240620; www.stf.org.my; Waterfront Promenade; ☎8am-5pm Mon-Fri, closed public holidays) This is mainly an administrative office for local tourism professionals but Priscilla is happy to help travellers with questions.

i Getting There & Away

As more and more Sarawakians have acquired their own wheels, public bus networks – especially short-haul routes in the Kuching area – have withered. For complicated political reasons, some services have been 'replaced' by unregulated and chaotic minibuses, which have irregular times, lack fixed stops and are basically useless for tourists.

The only way to get to many nature sites in Western Sarawak is to hire a taxi or join a tour. The exceptions are Bako National Park, Semenggoh Nature Reserve, Kubah National Park, Matang Wildlife Centre and, somewhat less conveniently, the Wind Cave and the Fairy Cave.

Air

Kuching International Airport, 12km south of the city centre, has direct air links with Singapore, Johor Bahru (the Malaysian city across the causeway from Singapore), Kuala Lumpur (KL), Penang, Kota Kinabalu (KK), Bandar Seri Begawan (BSB) and Pontianak.

MASwings, a subsidiary of Malaysia Airlines, is basically Malaysian Borneo's very own domestic airline. Flights link its hubs in Miri and Kuching with 14 destinations around Sarawak, including the lowland cities of Sibü, Bintulu, Limbang and Lawas and the upland destinations of Gunung Mulu National Park, Bario and Ba Kelalan.

The airport has three departure halls: 'Domestic Departures' for flights within Sarawak; 'Domestic Departures (Outside Sarawak)' for travel to other parts of Malaysia; and 'International Departures'.

Inside the terminal, there's a **Tourist Information Centre** (Arrival level, Kuching International Airport; ☎9am-10pm) next to the luggage carroussels and customs. Foreign currency can be exchanged at the **CIMB Bank counter** (Arrival level, Kuching International Airport; ☎7.30am-7.30pm) but rates are poor. Places with **free wi-fi** include Starbucks and McDonald's. Among the **ATMs** there is one in front of McDonald's. To buy a Celcom SIM Card, head to the **Blue Cube kiosk** (Departure level). For ticketing issues, drop by the **Malaysian Airlines & MASwings office** (Departure level, Kuching International Airport; ☎5am-8pm).

Those overweight kilos can be shipped to airports around Malaysia at the **Excess Baggage counter** (☎014-287 3330; Next to Departure Hall B, Kuching International Airport; ☎7.30am-8.30pm). One kilo costs RM3.50 to Sibü, Bintulu and Miri and RM6.50 to RM8.50 to KL (minimum weight: 10kg).

Boat

Ekspress Bahagia (☎in Kuching 016-889 3013, 082-412246, in Sibü 016-800 5891, 319-228) runs a daily express ferry from Kuching's Express Wharf, 6km east of the centre, to Sibü. Departures are at 8.30am from Kuching and at 11.30am from Sibü (RM45, five hours). It's a good idea to book a day ahead. A taxi from town to the wharf costs RM25.

Bus

Every half-hour or so from about 6am to 6.30pm, various buses run by City Public Link (eg K9) and STC (eg 3A, 4B, 6 and 2) link central Kuching's Saujana Bus Station with the Regional Express Bus Terminal. Saujana's ticket windows can point you to the next departure. A taxi from the city centre costs RM28 to RM30.

KUCHING SENTRAL This massive **bus terminal-cum-shopping mall** (cnr Jln Penrissen & Jln Airport), opened in 2012, handles almost all of Kuching's medium- and all long-haul routes. Situated about 10km south of the centre, it's also known as Six-and-a-Half-Mile Bus Station. Amenities include electronic departure boards and cafes offering wi-fi. Book your ticket at a company counter, then pay at counter 2 or 3 (marked 'Cashier/Boarding Pass'). Before boarding, show your tickets to the staff at the Check-In desk.

TO CENTRAL SARAWAK From 6.30am to 10.30pm, a dozen different companies send buses at least hourly along Sarawak's northern coast to Miri (RM80, 14½ hours), with stops at Sibü (RM50, 7½ hours), Bintulu (RM70, 1½ hours), Batu Niah Junction (jumping-off point for Niah National Park) and Lambir Hills National Park. Bus Asia, for instance, has nine departures a day, the first at 7.30am, the last at 10pm; unlike its competitors, the company has a **city centre office** (Map p384; ☎082-411111; cnr Jln Abell & Jln Chan Chin Ann; ☎6am to 10pm) and,

from Monday to Saturday, runs shuttle buses out to Kuching Sentral. Luxurious 'VIP buses', eg those run by **Asia Star** (☎1300-888 287; <http://asiastar.my>), have just three seats across (28 in total), and some come with on-board toilets, and yet cost a mere RM10 to RM20 more than regular coaches. To get to Brunei, Limbang or Sabah, you have to change buses in Miri.

TO WESTERN SARAWAK Buses to the Semenggoh Wildlife Centre, Bako National Park, Kubah National Park and the Matang Wildlife Sanctuary stop at or near Saujana Bus Station. Buses to Lundu (including the Wind Cave and Fairy Cave) use Kuching Sentral.

Taxi

For some destinations, the only transport option – other than taking a tour – is chartering a taxi through your hotel or guesthouse or via a company such as Kuching City Radio Taxi (p400). Hiring a red-and-yellow cab for an eight-hour day should cost about RM250, with the price depending in part on distance; unofficial taxis may charge less. If you'd like your driver to wait at your destination and then take you back to town, count on paying about RM20 per hour of wait time.

Listed below is a sample of one-way taxi fares from Kuching (prices are 50% higher at night):

Destination	Fare
Annah Rais Longhouse	at least RM80
Bako Bazaar (Bako National Park)	RM40
Express Wharf (ferry to Sibu)	RM25
Fairy Cave	RM40 (including Wind Cave and three hours wait time: RM170)
Kubah National Park	RM50
Matang Wildlife Centre	RM60
Santubong Peninsula Resorts	RM50
Sarawak Cultural Village	RM50
Semenggoh Nature Reserve	RM40 (round-trip including one hour wait time RM90 to RM100)
Wind Cave	RM40

① Getting Around

Almost all of Kuching's attractions are within easy walking distance of each other so taxis or buses are only really needed to reach the airport, Kuching Sentral (the long-haul bus terminal), the Express Wharf for the ferry to Sibu and the Cat Museum.

To/From the Airport

The price of a red-and-yellow taxi into Kuching is fixed at RM26, including luggage; a larger *tekisi eksekutif* (executive taxi), painted blue, costs RM35. Coupons are sold inside the terminal next to the car-rental counters.

Boat

Bow-steered wooden boats known as *tambang*, powered by an outboard motor, shuttle passengers back and forth across Sungai Sarawak, linking jetties along the Waterfront Promenade with destinations such as Kampung Boyan (for Fort Margherita) and the Astana. The fare for Sarawak's cheapest cruise is 50 sen (more from 10pm to 6am); pay as you disembark. If a *tambang* isn't tied up when you arrive at a dock, just wait and one will usually materialise fairly soon.

Bus

Saujana Bus Station (Map p384; Jln Masjid) handles local and short-haul routes. Situated in the city centre on the dead-end street that links Jln Market with the Kuching Mosque. Three companies use the Saujana Bus Station:

City Public Link (☎082-239178) Has a proper ticket counter with posted schedules. Line numbers start with K. Urban services run from 6.30am or 7am to about 5.30pm. Buses K3 and K10 go to Kuching Sentral (the long-distance bus station) several times an hour.

Sarawak Transport Company (STC; ☎082-233579) The ticket window is in an old shipping container. Buses 2 and 3A go to Kuching Sentral (2A) about three times an hour. Bus 2 to Kuching's Sarawak General Hospital and Bau is run in conjunction with **Bau Transport Company**.

Bicycle

On Jln Carpenter, basic bicycle shops can be found at Nos 83, 88 and 96. Borneo Experiences (p390) can rent out bicycles for RM30 per day.

Car

Not many tourists rent cars in Sarawak. The reasons: road signage is not great; even the best road maps are a useless 1:900,000 scale; and picking up a vehicle in one city and dropping it off in another incurs hefty fees. That said, having your own car can be unbelievably convenient.

Before driving off, make sure the car you've been assigned – some companies rent out vehicles that have seen better days – is in good shape mechanically and has all the requisite safety equipment (eg seat belts).

Half-a-dozen car-rental agencies have desks in the arrivals hall of Kuching Airport, including:

Ami Car Rental (☎082-427441, 082-579679; www.amicarrental.com)

Flexi Car Rental (☎082-452200, 082-335282, emergency 24hr 019-886 5282; www.flexicarrental.com)

Golden System (☎082-333609, 082-611359; www.goldencar.com.my) We've had good reports on this outfit.

Hertz (☎082-450740; www.hertz.com) Backed by an international reputation.

Motorbike

Renting a motorbike can be a great way to visit Kuching-area sights – provided you know how to ride, your rain gear is up to scratch and you manage to find your way despite the poor signage. Borneo Experiences (p390) have motorbikes for daily rent: RM40 for 100cc and RM50 for 125cc.

An Hui Motor (Map p384; ☎016-886 3328, 082-412419; 29 Jln Tabuan; ☀8am-6pm Mon-Sat, 8am-noon Sun) A motorbike repair shop that charges RM30 per day for a Vespa-like Suzuki RG (110cc) or RG (120cc) and RM40 for a 125cc scooter (including helmet), plus a deposit of RM100. Insurance covers the bike but not the driver and may be valid only within a 60km radius of Kuching, so check before you head to Sema-tan, Lundu or Annah Rais. Situated next to Ting & Ting supermarket.

Taxi

Kuching now has two kinds of taxis: the traditional red-and-yellow kind; and the larger, more comfortable – and pricier – executive taxis (*teksiksekutiv*), which are painted blue.

Taxis can be hailed on the street, found at taxi ranks (of which the city centre has quite a few, eg at larger hotels) or ordered by phone 24 hours a day from:

ABC Radio Call Service (☎016-861 1611, 082-611611)

Kuching City Radio Taxi (☎082-348898, 082-480000)

T&T Radio Call Taxi (☎016-888 2255, 082-343343)

All Kuching taxis – except those on the flat-fare run to/from the airport (RM26) – are required to use meters; overcharging is not common so taking a taxi is only rarely an unpleasant experience. Flag fall is RM10; after the first 3km (or, in traffic, nine minutes of stop-and-go) the price is RM1.20 per km or for each three minutes. There's a RM2 charge to summon a cab by phone. Fares go up by 50% from midnight to 6am. One-way taxi fares from central Kuching:

Cat Museum (North Kuching)	RM20 to RM25
Indonesian consulate	RM25 to RM30
Kuching Sentral	(long-distance bus terminal) RM28 to RM30
Visa Department	RM15

WESTERN SARAWAK

From Tanjung Datu National Park at Sarawak's far western tip to Bako National Park northeast of Kuching, and inland to Annah Rais Longhouse and the Batang Ai Region, western Sarawak offers a dazzling array of natural sights and indigenous cultures. Most places listed below are within day trip or overnight distance of Kuching.

Bako National Park

Occupying a jagged peninsula jutting into the South China Sea, Sarawak's oldest **national park** (☎at Bako Bazaar 082-431336, at park HQ 082-478011; www.sarawakforestry.com; adult RM20; ☀park office 8am-5pm) is just 37km northeast of downtown Kuching but feels like it's worlds away. It's one of the best places in Sarawak to see rainforest animals in their native habitats.

The coast of the 27-sq-km peninsula has lovely pocket beaches tucked into secret bays interspersed with wind-sculpted cliffs, forested bluffs and stretches of brilliant mangrove swamp. The interior of the park is home to streams, waterfalls and a range of distinct ecosystems, including classic lowland rainforest (mixed dipterocarp forest) and *kerangas* (heath forest). Hiking trails cross the sandstone plateau that forms the peninsula's backbone and connect with some of the main beaches, all of which can be reached by boat from park HQ.

Bako is notable for its incredible biodiversity, which includes almost every vegetation type in Borneo and encompasses everything from terrestrial orchids and pitcher plants to long-tailed macaques and bearded pigs. The stars of the show are the proboscis monkeys – this is one of the best places in Borneo to observe these endemics up close.

Bako is an easy day trip from Kuching, but it would be a shame to rush it – we recommend staying a night or two to really enjoy the wild beauty of the place. Getting to Bako by public transport is easy.

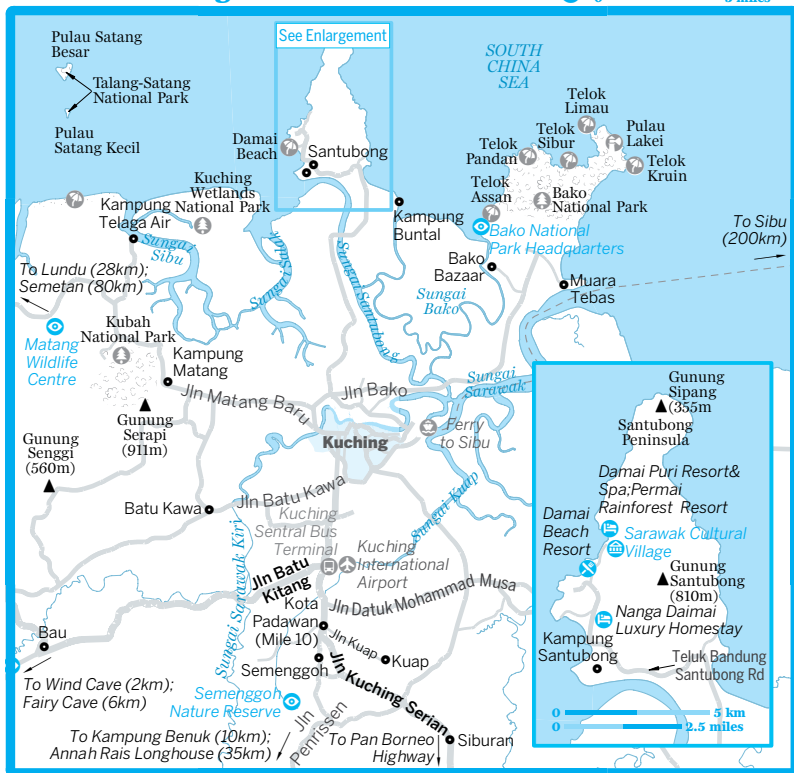
👁 Sights & Activities

Interpretation Centre

MUSEUM

Offers an old-fashioned introduction to the park's seven distinct ecosystems and an exposé of the co-dependent relationship between nepenthes (pitcher plants) and ants. There are plans to move the centre to the new HQ building.

Around Kuching



Wildlife Watching

Scientists estimate that Bako is home to 37 species of mammal, including silver-leaf monkeys, palm squirrels and nocturnal creatures such as the mouse deer, civet and colugo (flying lemur); 24 reptile species, among them the common water monitor, which can reach a length of over 1m; and about 190 kinds of bird, some of them migratory.

Jungle creatures are easiest to spot shortly after sunrise and right before sunset, so for any real wildlife watching you'll have to stay over. Surprisingly, the area around park HQ is a particularly good place to see animals, including reddish-brown proboscis monkeys, whose pot-bellied stomachs are filled with bacteria that help them derive nutrients from almost-indigestible vegetation. You often hear them as they crash through the branches long before seeing a flash of fur – or a male's pendulous nose flopping as he munches on tender young leaves.

Proboscis monkeys, who show little fear of, or interest in, humans, can often be found: on branches above the park's visitors chalets; around the mangrove boardwalk between the jetty and park HQ; in the trees along the Telok Assam Beach near park HQ; along the Telok Paku Trail, where they forage in the trees lining the cliff; and along the Telok Delima Trail.

The muddy floors of mangrove forests are home to an assortment of peculiar creatures, including hermit crabs, fiddler crabs and mudskippers (fish that spend much of their time skipping around atop the tidal mud under mangrove trees).

The Bornean bearded pigs that hang around near the cafeteria and chalets with their piglets are a big hit with kids. Not long ago a tourist guide was overheard commenting, 'at the longhouse they would be on the grill already!'

CHEEKY MACAQUES

That sign at Bako National Park's campground – 'Naughty monkeys around – watch out!' – is not a joke. The long-tailed macaques that hang about the park HQ are great to watch, but they are mischievous and cunning – an attitude fostered by tourists who insist on offering them food. The monkeys (and some tourists) are opportunists, and they will make running leaps at anything potentially edible they think they can carry off. Keep your room's doors and windows closed, zip your bags and do not leave valuables, food or drink – or anything in a plastic bag (known by macaques as the preferred human repositories for edibles) – unattended, especially on the beaches or on the chalet verandahs.

It's wise to leave the monkeys in peace – the males can be aggressive, and once you've seen a macaque tear open a drink can with his teeth you'll be happy that you didn't mess with them. Rangers advise against looking a macaque in the eye (he'll think you're about to attack) or screaming (if he knows you're scared, he'll be more aggressive). Recently, especially aggressive large males have been tranquilised, captured and released far, far away. Monkeys are not a problem after dark.

Jungle Walks

Bako's 17 trails are suitable for all levels of fitness and motivation, with routes ranging from short strolls to strenuous all-day treks to the far (ie eastern) end of the peninsula. It's easy to find your way around because trails are colour-coded and clearly marked with stripes of paint. Plan your route before starting out and aim to be back at Telok Asam before dark, ie by about 6pm at the latest. It's possible to hire a boat to one of the far beaches and then hike back, or to hike to one of the beaches and arrange for a boat to meet you there.

Park staff are happy to help you plan your visit, provide updates on trail conditions and tides, help with boat hire and provision you with a B&W map that has details on each of the park's hiking options. A billboard near the Education Centre lists conservative time estimates for each trail. Even if you know your route, let staff know where you'll be going so that they can inscribe you in the Guest Movement Register Book; sign back in when you return.

Take adequate water and be prepared for intense sun (with a sun hat and sunscreen) as the *kerangas* (distinctive vegetation zone of Borneo), has precious little shade for long stretches. Sun-sensitive folks might consider lightweight long-sleeve shirts and trousers. Mozzie repellent is a good idea as well.

A note on trail names: *bukit* means hill, *tanjung* means point, *telok* means bay, *pantai* means beach and *ulu* means upriver or interior.

Lintang Trail

HIKING

If you have only one day in Bako, try to get an early start and take the Lintang Trail (5.8km, 3½ to four hours round-trip). It traverses a range of vegetation and climbs the sandstone escarpment up to the *kerangas*, where you'll find some grand views and many pitcher plants (especially along the trail's northeastern segment).

Telok Limau Trail

HIKING

Bako's longest trail goes to Telok Limau, 13km from park HQ (8½ hours one-way), where there's a nice beach and a designated camping area. Consider hoofing it one way and taking a boat the other (RM164 for up to five people). Cellphone coverage is often available from the slopes above the beach but don't count on being able to coordinate with your boatman by mobile.

Swimming

At Bako, it's easy to combine rainforest tramping, which quickly gets hot and sweaty, with a refreshing dip in the South China Sea.

Stinging jellyfish can sometimes be a nuisance, especially in April and May. Also to be avoided, especially around Telok Paku: stingrays, whose stabs can be quite painful. To keep away the sandflies on the beach, use mozzie repellent.

The muddy, tannin-stained waters of Bako's rivers shelter crocodiles, so forget about taking a dip. A few years ago a schoolboy was eaten by a croc a bit upriver from Bako Bazaar; his body was never found.

Telok Assam Beach

BEACH

Swimming is allowed at the beach near park HQ but the water can be muddy. In the distance (to the west) you can see the wild east coast of the Santubong Peninsula.

Telok Pandan Beaches

BEACH

The gorgeous beach at **Telok Pandan Kecil**, a 2.6km walk from park HQ, is surrounded by spectacularly colourful sandstone formations. Pitcher plants can be seen on the trail down to the beach. Around the point (to the northwest) is the famous **Bako Sea Stack**, an islet that looks like a cobra rearing its head. To get close enough for a photo, though, you'll have to hire a boat.

As you move east, the next beach you come to is **Telok Pandan Besar**, a quiet, attractive stretch of sand accessible only by boat. Hiring a boat at park HQ costs RM40/80 one-way/return.

Telok Sibur Beach

BEACH

The rarely visited beach at Telok Sibur is accessible on foot (it's 5.5km from park HQ) but hard to reach as the descent is steep and you have to make your way through a mangrove swamp. Before heading out, check the tidal schedule with park staff to make sure the river won't be too deep to cross, either going or returning. A boat from park HQ costs RM105/210 one-way/return.

Telok Limau Beach

BEACH

At the park's northeastern tip, Telok Limau is 13km on foot from park HQ. A boat to/from Telok Limau and the nearby island of **Pulau Lakei**, which has a white-sand beach and the grave of a Malay warrior, costs RM164 one-way.

Telok Kruin Beach

BEACH

At the peninsula's far eastern tip, this bay is 12km on foot from park HQ; a boat ride all the way around Telok Limau costs RM250 one-way.

Nightwalk

WILDLIFE WATCHING

(per person RM10; ☀8pm) The best way to see creatures that are out and about at night – we're talking spiders, fireflies, cicadas, frogs, anemones, owls and the like – is to take a night-time walk led by a park ranger trained in spotting creatures that city slickers would walk right by. Reviewed by one traveller as 'awesome', Bako's 1½- to two-hour night treks, when available, are not to be missed. Bring a torch (flashlight).

**Tours**

Park HQ does not have enough permanent staff to accompany individual visitors, so if you'd like to hike with a guide, enquire at the boat terminal in Bako Bazaar or, better yet, ask the National Park Booking Office in Kuching for the phone numbers of approved guides. The park is very strict about allowing only certified guides (unlicensed guides and the groups they're with are forced to leave). Kuching travel agencies charge about RM230 per person for a tour, including the boat ride.

**Sleeping**

Bako has developed a reputation for less-than-adequate accommodation but by the time you read this, the new hostel should be open and at least some of the chalets upgraded. There's a RM10 key deposit. Unlocked storage is available at park reception free of charge.

In-park accommodation often fills up, especially from June to October, so if you'd like to stay over book ahead:

- » Online via <http://ebooking.com.my>
- » By email (npbooking@sarawaknet.gov.my)
- » By phone or in person through the National Park Booking Office in Kuching
- » By phoning the park (only after 5pm Monday to Friday and on weekends and holidays)

Some travel agencies reserve blocks of rooms that they release a week ahead if their packages remain unsold, and individual travellers also sometimes cancel, so week-before and last-minute vacancies are far from unknown.

Forest Hostel

HOSTEL \$

(dm RM15.90, 4-bed r RM42) The new hostel, made of concrete, will have a private bathroom in each simply-furnished, three-bed room. Bring your own towel and a top sheet (bottom sheets are provided).

Forest Lodge Type 5

CHALET \$\$

(3-bed r RM106, 2-room chalet RM159) Each two-room (six-bed) chalet, two of which are being upgraded, has one bathroom and one fridge. Fan-equipped.

Forest Lodge Type 6

CHALET \$

(d RM53, 2-room chalet RM79.50) Each rustic, two-bed room has a wood-plank floor, private bathroom, fridge and fan.

Camping

(per person RM5) Because of 'naughty monkeys', tents can be set up at park HQ's fenced-in camping zone only after 6pm and must be taken down during the day. You can also pitch your tent in the park's far eastern reaches at Sibur, Kruin and Limau Beaches and on Pulau Lakei.

CAMPGROUND \$



Eating

Cooking is not allowed in park accommodation. The canteen charges RM0.50 for boiling water to prepare instant noodles. The nearest grocery is in Bako Bazaar.

Canteen

CAFETERIA \$

(3-dish buffet meal approx RM8.50; ☺ 7.30am-10pm) The new cafeteria, designed to be macaque-proof, serves a varied and tasty selection of fried rice, chicken, fish, hot dogs and cooked veggies. Buffet meals are available from 11.30am to 2pm and 6.30pm to 8pm.



Getting There & Away

Getting to the park by public transport is a cinch. First take one of the hourly buses from Kuching to Bako Bazaar, then hop on a motorboat to Telok Assam jetty, about 400m along a wooden boardwalk from park HQ.

Park HQ and some other parts of the park have (low-power) mobile-phone coverage, ideal for coordinating your boat ride back to Bako Bazaar. At HQ, Celcom customers may have to head to the beach to get reception.

Boat

Motorboat hire (Bako Bazaar dock; ☺ 8am-4pm) from Bako Bazaar dock, where visitors pay their park entry fee, to park HQ costs RM94 return; the journey takes about 20 minutes. Each vessel can carry up to five people; assemble a quintet to optimise cost-sharing. If you don't plan to return at the same time as your boat-mates, the fee for the return leg (RM47) may have to be split among a smaller number of passengers. If you link up with other travellers at the park and share a boat back to Bako Bazaar, your return voucher – valid whether you come back the same day or overnight at the park – is theoretically reimbursable. Changing your return time is easy; just phone your boatman's mobile phone (it's a good idea to note his boat number as well).

Most day trippers try to get back to Bako Bazaar by 4.15pm to catch the 4.30pm bus to Kuching (the 5.30pm bus is not 100% reliable). Note: buses have been known to leave a few minutes before their scheduled departure time.

When the tide is low, boats may not be able to approach the jetty at Telok Assam so you

may have to wade ashore. Boatmen may insist on an early afternoon return time to beat a late afternoon low tide – but bold outboard jockeys have been known to make the trip back to Bako Bazaar even at the lowest of tides.

From late November to February or March, the sea is often rough.

Bus

Bright red bus 1 (RM3.50) leaves from 6 Jln Khoo Hun Yeang in Kuching (in front of Toko Minuman Jumbo buffet restaurant), right across the street from the food stalls of the Open-Air Market. Departures from Kuching are every hour on the hour 7am to 5pm, and from Bako Bazaar every hour on the half-hour from 6.30am to (usually) 5.30pm. If you miss the last bus, ask around the village for a minibus or private car (RM40) to Kuching.

In Kuching, bus 1 also picks up passengers at stops along the waterfront, on the river side of the street; motion to the driver to stop. These include bus shelters on Jln Gambier across the street from the Brooke Memorial; across the street from 15 Main Bazaar, next to the Chinese Museum; on Jln Tunku Abdul Rahman next to the 7-Eleven in the Riverside Suites; and on Jln Abell in front of Alliance Bank, a block northwest of the Lime Tree Hotel.

Taxi

A cab from Kuching to Bako Bazaar (45 minutes) costs RM40.

Santubong Peninsula

Like Bako National Park 8km to the east, the Santubong Peninsula (also known as Damai) is a 10km-long finger of land jutting out into the South China Sea. The main drawcards are the longhouses of the Sarawak Cultural Village, some beaches, jungle walks, a golf course and a great seafood restaurant in the fishing village of Kampung Buntal. Santubong is the best place in Sarawak for a lazy, pampered beach holiday.

Sights & Activities

Sarawak Cultural Village

ECO-MUSEUM

(SCV; ☎ 082-846411; www.scv.com.my; adult/child 6-12yr RM60/30, cultural show 45 minutes; 11.30am & 4pm; ☺ 9am-5.15pm, last entry 4pm) This living museum is centred on seven traditional dwellings: three Dayak longhouses (including a Bidayuh headhouse with skulls and the only Melanau tallhouse left in Sarawak), a Penan hut, a Malay townhouse (the only place you have to remove your shoes) and a

Chinese farmhouse. It may sound contrived and even hokey but the SCV is held in high esteem by locals for its role in keeping their cultures and traditions alive.

The dwellings are (supposed to be) staffed by members of the ethnic group they represent – except the Penan dwelling, that is, whose emissaries, true to their nomadic tradition, went walkabout. Signage, however, is poor, so if you don't ask questions of the 'locals' – who demonstrate crafts and cookie-making – the subtle differences in architecture, cuisine, dress and music between the various groups may not be apparent. At the Penan hut you can try a blowpipe (RM1 for three darts), while the Malay townhouse offers top spinning (three spins for RM1).

Twice a day, the **cultural show** showcases traditional music and dance. The lively Melanau entry involves whirling women and clacking bamboo poles, while the Orang Ulu dance (spoiler alert!) includes four women, several balloons and a blowpipe hunter.

It may be possible to book workshops (RM5 per person per hour) in handicrafts (eg bead-making), music and dance – contact the SCV in advance. If you're planning to get married, you can choose to tie the knot here with a colourful Iban, Bidayuh, Orang Ulu or Malay ceremony.

Hotels and tour agencies in Kuching offer packages (per person RM125), but it's easy enough to get out here by shuttle bus. The SCV is a short walk from both the Damai Beach Resort and the Permai Rainforest Resort.

Permai Rainforest Resort

BEACH

(☎082-846490; www.permairainforest.com; Damai Beach; adult/child RM5/2) The day rate at this bungalow complex is a real bargain. In addition to a safe, fine-sand beach with changing facilities, a variety of leisure and adventure activities are on offer, including a highropes course (per person RM60), a perfectly vertical climbing wall (RM48), sea kayaking (RM80 for three hours) and mountain biking (RM10 per hour). Great for tweens and teens.

Damai Beach Resort

BEACH

(www.damaibeachresort.com; Teluk Bandung, Santubong) Access to the hotel's lovely beach costs just RM2. For RM119 two adults and two children can have daytime (10am to 6pm) room access and can use the resort's wealth of facilities, including the pool.

Damai Central Beach

BEACH

A free beach with places to eat, situated across the parking lot from the Sarawak Cultural Village. From 10am to 7pm, amenities include showers (RM2), towel rental (RM5) and lockers (RM3).

Jungle Walks

HIKING

Several trails take you into the jungle interior of the peninsula, declared a national park in 2007. One, a challenging route with red trail markings, ascends towering **Guning Santubong** (880m); the last bit is pretty steep, with steps and rope ladders, so it takes about three hours up and two hours down. A few recent climbers have gotten lost and stranded after dark so whatever happens start heading down by about 2pm. The peak – which some people want to make accessible by cable car – features in a variety of local ghost stories related to a princess captured by a prince.

Another trail, an easy-to-moderate circular walk (3km, two hours) with blue markings, passes by a pretty **waterfall**.

These trails can be picked up at two points along the main road to the beach resorts: at Bukit Puteri and, about 2km north, at Green Paradise Seafood, which tries to charge entry fees, a procedure currently being investigated by the government.

The east side of the peninsula – the coast you can see from Bako National Park – is wild and undeveloped, with a profusion of wildlife. Ask locals about how to get there on foot from the Permai Rainforest Resort and the main road to Kuching, or you can hire a boat in Kampung Buntal.

Tours

Coastal areas west and east of the Santubong Peninsula are home to a wide variety of wildlife. Oft-spotted species include endangered Irrawaddy dolphins (known locally as *pesut*), proboscis monkeys, estuarine crocodiles and all manner of birds.

Resorts on the peninsula, and guesthouses and tour agencies in Kuching, can make arrangements, or you can contact:

CPH Travel

BOAT

(☎in Kuching 082-243708; www.cphtravel.com.my; Damai Puri Resort & Spa) Offers boat trips, including cruises through the Kuching Wetlands National Park.

Mr Ehwan bin Ibrahim

BOAT

(☎019-878 5088; Kampung Buntal) A local boatman who offers three-hour dolphin-and-mangrove tours (per person for two/four people RM180/155) and four- or five-hour fishing trips that include a swimming stop at remote Polycarp Beach (RM500 for two people).

Sleeping

Many resorts allow children to stay in parents' rooms for no extra charge. Kampung Santubong has about 15 homestays. It's possible to camp at the Permai Rainforest Resort.

Permai Rainforest Resort

BUNGALOW \$\$

(☎082-846490, 082-846487; www.permairainforest.com; Damai Beach; 6-bed longhouse RM260, 6-bed cabin RM305, 2-bed tree house RM300, camping per person RM15; @☎) This lushly forested bungalow complex, on a beach-adjacent hillside, hosts macaques and silver-leaf monkeys in addition to paying guests. Accommodation ranges from rustic, simply furnished cabins to air-con wooden bungalows towering 6m off the ground. Offers plenty of outdoor activities. Prices drop from Sunday to Thursday.

Damai Beach Resort

RESORT \$\$\$

(☎082-846999; www.damaibeachresort.com; Teluk Bandung, Santubong; d incl breakfast from RM440; @☎☎) A great getaway for families, this 252-room beach resort has enough activities and amenities to make you feel like you're on a cruise ship (in a good way), including boat excursions, sea kayaking (RM15 to RM20 per hour) and even an 18-hole **golf course** (www.damagolf.com) designed by Arnold Palmer.

Nanga Damai Luxury Homestay

B&B \$\$

(☎019-887 1017; www.nangadamai.com; Jln Sultan Tengah, Santubong; d incl breakfast RM100-160; @☎☎) The lovely living room, cosy chill-out verandah, 8m kidney-shaped pool and bright, comfortable rooms (six in total) make it easy to meet the two-night minimum stay. Not suitable for children under 16. The Kuching-Santubong shuttles pass by here.

Santubong Homestay

HOMESTAY \$

(☎013-895 1245, 082-846773; niesa0619@gmail.com; House 207, Kampung Santubong; per person RM30, with lunch RM40, with lunch & dinner RM40) Sauji and Mariah rent out three rooms in their home, one with attached bath. Homey and tranquil. Great value.

**Eating**

All the resorts have restaurants. At the Sarawak Cultural Village, the **restaurant** (meal RM7-10) serves a buffet of Sarawakian dishes.

**Lim Hock Ann Seafood**

SEAFOOD \$\$

(Kampung Buntal; mains RM8-20, fish per kg RM39-85; ☎11am-2pm & 5-10pm, closed Mon lunch) A sprawling, open-air shed on stilts with a wide-plank floor and a tin roof, this classic Chinese-style seafood restaurant is in Kampung Buntal, a fishers' village 11km south-east of the SCV (on the east coast of the base of the peninsula). The fresh, locally landed fish is superb.

Damai Central

HAWKER \$

Across the parking lot from the Sarawak Cultural Village, this attractive new complex has several restaurants, a 7-Eleven and a food court (mains RM5 to RM8).

**Getting There & Away****Minibus**

Kuching is linked to the Santubong Peninsula (45 minutes) by the slow K15 bus (RM4) from Saujana Bus Station and minibuses operated by two companies:

Setia Kawan (☎019-825 1619; adult/child under 12yr RM10/5) Has departures from Kuching's waterfront every two hours from 7.15am to 10pm; stops include the Singgahsana Lodge (p390), which can take bookings; the Harbour View Hotel; and the Hilton, whose concierge is the go-to guy. Minibuses set off from the peninsula's Permai Rainforest Resort depart between 9am and 9pm.

Damai Beach Resort (☎082-380970, 082-846999) Has departures from Kuching's Grand Margherita Hotel and Riverside Majestic Hotel four times a day between 10.15am and 6.15pm; if possible, book a day ahead. The last run back to Kuching leaves the Damai Beach Resort at 5.15pm.

Taxi

A cab from Kuching to the SCV or the resorts costs RM50 to RM60 (RM70 from the airport).

Kuching Wetlands National Park

The only way to see the majestic mangroves of 66-sq-km Kuching Wetlands National Park is – as you would expect – by boat. Situated about 15km northwest of Kuching (as the crow flies), the park doesn't have a HQ

complex, just low-lying islands and saline waterways lined with salt-resistant trees that provide food and shelter to proboscis monkeys, silver-leaf monkeys and fireflies (above the water line); estuarine crocodiles and amphibious fish called mudskippers (at the water line); and countless varieties of fish and prawns (below the water line). Nearby open water is one of the finest places in Sarawak to spot snub-nosed Irrawaddy dolphins.

The morning (about 9am) is the best time to see the dolphins, while late-afternoon cruises are optimal for sighting a flash of reddish-brown fur as proboscis monkeys leap from tree to tree in search of the tenderest, tastiest young leaves. Sunset on the water is magical – and unbelievably romantic, especially if your guide points out an *api-api* tree (a ‘firefly tree’, surrounded by swirling green points of light). After dark, by holding a torch up at eye level, you can often spot the reflections of animalian eyes, including – if you’re lucky – a crocodile, its reptilian brain wholly focused on biting, drowning and then devouring its next warm-blooded victim.

Tours

Packages include transfers from and to your hotel. Boats usually set sail from the Sarawak Boat Club or Telaga Air.

CPH Travel Boat

BOAT

(📍in Kuching 082-243708; www.cphtravel.com.my) Has a near-monopoly on boats heading to the wetlands. Offers a mangrove and Irrawaddy dolphin sighting cruise (RM140 per person) at 8.30am and a wildlife cruise (RM160) at 4.30pm.

Semenggoh Nature Reserve

One of the best places in the world to see semi-wild orang-utans in their natural jungle habitat, swinging from trees and scurrying up vines, the **Semenggoh Wildlife Centre** (📍082-618325; www.sarawakforestry.com; ☀8am–5pm), can be visited on a half-day trip from Kuching or combined with visit to Annah Rais Longhouse and/or Kampung Benuk.

Situated within the 6.8-sq-km Semenggoh Nature Reserve, the centre is home to 25 orang-utans: 11 who were rescued from captivity or orphaned and their 14 Semenggoh-born offspring, some mere babes-in-arms

who spend their days hanging onto their mother’s shaggy chests. Four of the tree-dwelling creatures are completely wild (ie find all their own food), but the rest often swing by (literally) park HQ to dine on bananas, coconuts, eggs and – though they don’t know it – medications. There’s no guarantee that any orang-utans, the world’s largest tree-dwelling animal, will show up, but even in fruiting season (late November or December to February or March) the chances are excellent. Semenggoh is noticeably less touristy (and much cheaper) than Sepilok Orang-utan Rehabilitation Centre in Sabah.

Hour-long feedings, in the rainforest a few hundred metres from park HQ, run from 9am to 10am and from 3pm to 4pm. When the feeding session looks like it’s over, rangers sometimes try to shoo away visitors (especially groups, whose guides are in any case eager to get back to Kuching), but orang-utans often turn up at park HQ, so don’t rush off straightaway if everything seems quiet.

For safety reasons, visitors are asked to stay at least 5m from the orang-utans – the animals can be unpredictable – and are advised to keep a tight grip on their backpacks, water bottles and cameras because orang-utans have been known to snatch things in search of something yummy. To avoid annoying – or even angering – the orang-utans, do not point at them with anything that looks like a gun (eg a walking stick); do not scream or make sudden movements; and, when you take pictures, do not use flash.

Semenggoh Nature Reserve has two beautiful trails that pass through primary rainforest: the **Masing Trail** (Main Trail; red trail markings; 30 minutes), which links the HQ with the highway; and the **Brooke’s Pool Trail** (yellow and red trail markings), a 2km loop from HQ. At research time both were closed because of attacks on staff and visitors by two particularly aggressive orang-utans, Ritchie and Delima (‘Hot Mama’), whom rangers guess were mistreated in captivity. When the trails reopen, it should be possible to hire a guide at the Information Centre for RM30 per hour (for up to 10 people). Tickets are valid for the whole day so it’s possible to come for the morning feeding, visit a longhouse, and then see the afternoon feeding as well. Note: there’s nowhere in the park to buy food.

Getting There & Away

Two bus companies provide reliable public transport from Kuching's Saujana Bus Station to the park gate, which is 1.3km down the hill from park HQ (RM3, 45 minutes):

City Public Link – bus K6 departs from Kuching at 7.15am, 10.15am, 1pm and 3.30pm, and from Semenggoh (spelled 'Semenggok' on bus schedules) at about 8.30am, 11.15am, 2.15pm and 4.30pm.

Sarawak Transport Company – bus 6 has Kuching departures at 7am and 1pm; buses back pass by Semenggoh at about 9.45am and 3.45pm.

A taxi from Kuching costs RM45 one-way or RM90 to RM100 return, including one hour of wait time. Tours are organised by Kuching guesthouses and tour agencies.

Kampung Benuk

This quiet, flowery **Bidayuh village** (adult RM6), where the loudest sound is often the crowing of a cock, attracted lots of tourist back when the road ended here. These days, it gets relatively few visitors, despite being a pleasant place to spend a few hours.

The traditional, 32-door **longhouse** (Lg 5), with bouncy bamboo common areas, is still home to a few families, though most of the villagers now live in attractive modern houses. In the **barok** (ritual hall), you can see about a dozen head-hunted skulls, bone-white but tinged with green, hanging from the rafters; pick up the key at the reception office. And at the end of the lane, about 100m beyond the *barok*, the widow of the village shaman runs a **mini-museum** (donation requested; ☎9am–5pm Mon–Sat) filled with all sorts of interesting bric-a-brac, including ceramic rice jars, monkey skulls, blow-dart pipes and two WWII helmets, one British, the other Japanese.

Sleeping

Kurakura Homestay

HOMESTAY \$\$

(☎012-892 0051; www.kurakura.asia; per person incl meals RM160) Run by Norwegian-born Lars and his Bidayuh wife Liza, this super-friendly, sustainable jungle homestay occupies a wooden house built in 2008 on land that once belonged to her grandfather. Activities include kayaking and trekking (RM165 for an all-day outing). Situated 20 minutes to 40 minutes by boat from the village of Kampung Semadang. Rates include transport to and from Kuching or the Kuching Airport.

Annah Rais Longhouse

Although this Bidayuh longhouse has been on the tourist circuit for decades, it's still an excellent place to get a sense of what a longhouse is and what longhouse life is like.

The 500 residents of **Annah Rais** (adult/student RM8/4) are as keen as the rest of us to enjoy the comforts of modern life – they do love their mobile phones and 3G internet access – but they've made a conscious decision to preserve their traditional architecture and the social interaction it engenders. They've also decided that welcoming modern tourists is a good way to earn a living without moving to the city, something most young people end up doing.

Sights & Activities

Longhouse Veranda

NOTABLE BUILDING

Once you pay your entry fee (in an eight-sided wooden pavilion next to the parking lot), you're free to explore Annah Rais' three longhouses (Kupo Saba, Kupo Terekan and, across the river, Kupo Sijo) with a guide or on your own.

The most important feature of a Bidayuh longhouse is the *awah*, a long, covered common verandah – with a springy bamboo floor – that's used for economic activities, socialising and celebrations. Along one side, a long row of doors – Annah Rais has a total of 97 – leads to each family's private *bilik* (apartment). Paralleling the *awah*, opposite the long row of doors, is the *tanju*, an open-air verandah.

Headhouse

NOTABLE BUILDING

Whereas the Iban traditionally hung hunted heads outside each family's *bilik*, the Bidayuh grouped theirs together in the community's *pangghah* or *baruk* (communal meeting hall). The heads are no longer believed to protect the village – these days the people of Annah Rais are almost all Anglican (the Bidayuh of Kalimantan are mainly Catholic) – but about a dozen smoke-blackened human skulls still have pride of place in the headhouse, suspended over an 18th-century Dutch cannon. It is said that in some longhouses, a few old people still remember the name of each of the heads.

Sleeping

Annah Rais is a peaceful, verdant spot to chill out. Half-a-dozen families run homestays with shared bathrooms, either in one

of the three longhouses or in an adjacent detached house. Standard rates, agreed upon by the community, are RM98 per person for accommodation and delicious Bidayuh board, and RM298 per person – a bit much, perhaps – for a package that includes activities such as trekking, rafting, fishing, (mock) blowgun hunting, soaking in a natural hot spring and a dance performance.

Emily & John Ahwang

HOSTESTAY \$\$

(☎Emily 010-977 8114, John 016-855 2195; <http://22.com.my/homestay>) Emily and John, both of whom speak fluent English, love to welcome guests to their spotless, modern, two-storey home, built right into the longhouse.

Akam Ganja

HOSTESTAY \$\$

(☎010-984 3821; winniejagig@gmail.com) It's a pleasure to be hosted by Akam, a retired forestry official, and his wife Winnie, an English teacher, at their comfortable detached house on the riverbank.

Getting There & Away

Annah Rais is about 40km south of Kuching. A taxi from Kuching costs RM80 one-way.

A variety of Kuching guesthouses and tour agencies offer four-hour tours to Annah Rais (per person RM115, including Semenggoh Nature Reserve RM140).

Kubah National Park

Mixed dipterocarp forest, among the lush and most threatened habitats in Borneo, is front and centre at this 22-sq-km **national park** (☎082-845033; www.sarawakforestry.com; admission incl Matang Wildlife Centre RM20; ☀8am-5pm), which more than lives up to its clunky motto, 'the home of palms and frogs'. Scientists have found here an amazing 98 species of palm, out of 213 species known to live in Sarawak; and they have identified 61 species of frog and toad

(www.frogsofborneo.org), out of Borneo's more than 190 species. In 2012 researchers identified what they believe to be a new species of frog, adding it to a list that includes the aptly-named (but oddly shaped) horned frog and a flying frog that can glide from tree to tree thanks to the webbing between its toes. Kubah's jungles are also home to a wide variety of orchids – and seven semi-wild orang-utans.

Kubah's trails are much more shaded than those at Bako National Park, making the park ideal for the sun-averse. And when you're hot and sweaty from walking, you can cool off under a crystal-clear waterfall.

Sights & Activities

Rainforest Trails

HIKING

When you pay your entry fee, you'll receive a hand-coloured schematic map of the park's four interconnected trails (two other trails were closed as of mid-2012). They're well-marked so a guide isn't necessary. The park has about half-a-dozen rain shelters – keep an eye out for them so you'll know where to run in case of a downpour.

The **Selang Trail** (40 minutes to 60 minutes; trail-marked in yellow), linking the **Main Trail** (trail-marked in white) with the short segment of the **Rayu Trail** that's still open, passes by the **Selang Viewpoint**. Offshore you can see the turtle sanctuary of Pulau Satang.

The concrete-paved **Summit Road** (closed to non-official traffic), also known as the **Gunung Serapi Summit Trail**, runs along the park's southeastern edge from park HQ right up to the top of Kubah's highest peak, **Gunung Serapi** (911m), which holds aloft a TV and telecom tower; on foot, it's 3½ hours up and a bit less coming down. As you ascend, notice that the mix of trees and plants (including pitcher plants and ferns) changes with the elevation. The summit is often

GETTING TO INDONESIA: KUCHING TO PONTIANAK

Getting to the border A variety of bus companies ply the route between Kuching's Kuching Sentral bus terminal (and other cities along the Sarawak coast) and the west Kalimantan city of Pontianak (economy RM60, 1st class RM80, seven/10 hours via the new/old road), passing through the Tebedu-Entikong crossing 80km south of Kuching.

At the border Travellers from 64 countries can get a one-month Indonesian visa on arrival at the road crossing between Tededu (Malaysia) and Entikong (Indonesia), the only official land border between Sarawak and Kalimantan.

Moving on Pontianak is linked to other parts of Indonesia and to Singapore by airlines such as Batavia Air (www.batavia-air.com).

shrouded in mist but near the top there's a viewing platform. When it's clear, there are stupendous views all the way from Tanjung Datu National Park on the Indonesian border (to the northwest) to Gunung Santubong and Kuching (to the east).

The **Waterfall Trail** (3km or 1½ hours from HQ one-way; trail-marked from the Summit Road in blue) passes by wild durian trees and *belian* trees, otherwise known as 'ironwood' (*Eusideroxylon zwageri*). This incredibly durable – and valuable, and thus endangered – tropical hardwood was traditionally used in longhouse construction. As you would expect, this trail ends at a waterfall and a natural swimming pool.

Some visitors combine the Selang Trail and the Waterfall Trail to create a circuit that takes four to six hours. It is no longer possible to walk to the Matang Wildlife Centre because of the risks posed by semi-wild orang-utans.

Natural Frog Pond

WILDLIFE RESERVE

Situated 300m above sea level and about a half-hour's walk from park HQ, this artificial pool provides a breeding ground for numerous frog species. The delicate amphibians are especially active an hour or so after sunset (from about 8pm to 11pm), particularly when it's raining hard (during the day most prefer to hide in a hole in a tree), so the only way to see them is to overnight at the park. Bring a good flashlight. It may be possible to hire a ranger as a guide.

Palmetum

GARDENS

A labelled palm garden near park HQ, on the Main Trail.



Sleeping

Kubah is a lovely spot to kick back and relax. The attractive chalets, which have a total of 74 beds, can be booked online through <http://ebooking.com.my>, by email (nnpbooking@sarawaknet.gov.my), through the National Park Booking Office in Kuching, or by calling the park office. There's usually space, even on weekends, except on public and school holidays. A **camping ground** (per person RM5) is being constructed.

Forest Lodge Type 4

CHALET \$\$

(6-bed chalet RM225; ☼) These bi-level, all-wood chalets come with a balcony, a sitting room, a shower with enough room for two, a two-bed room and a four-bed room.

Forest Lodge Type 5

CHALET \$

(10-bed chalet RM150) Has a living room with couch and chairs, a dining table with a lazy Susan, and three bedrooms with a total of 10 beds. Fan-cooled.

Forest Hostel

HOSTEL \$

(dm RM15) Has 12 beds. Fan-cooled.



Eating

All accommodation options come with fully equipped kitchens, including a fridge, toaster and burners. There are plans to open a canteen (cafeteria) in the new HQ building but as of press time there was nowhere to buy food so bring all you'll need.



Getting There & Away

Kubah National Park is 25km northwest of Kuching. A taxi from Kuching costs RM50.

From Kuching's Saujana Bus Station, bus K21 to the Politeknik stops on the main road 400m from park HQ, next to the Kubah Family Park (RM4, one hour). Departures from Kuching are at 8am, 11am, 2pm and 4.30pm, and from the Politeknik, situated 2km beyond (ie north) of Kubah, at 6.30am, 9.30am, 12.30pm and 3.30pm.

MATANG WILDLIFE CENTRE

Situated at the western edge of Kubah National Park, the **Matang Wildlife Centre** (☎082-374869; www.sarawakforestry.com; admission incl Kubah National Park RM20; ☀8am-5pm, last entry 3.30pm) has had remarkable success rehabilitating rainforest animals rescued from captivity, especially orang-utans and sun bears. The highly professional staff do their best to provide their abused charges with natural living conditions on a limited budget, but there's no denying that the centre looks like a low-budget zoo plopped down in the jungle. Because of the centre's unique role, it's home to endangered animals that you're unlikely to see anywhere else in Sarawak.



Sights & Activities

Interpretation Centre

VISITORS CENTRE

Most of the display panels illustrate orang-utan rehabilitation. Inside the new HQ building.

Rescued Animals

WILDLIFE RESERVE

Some of the creatures here were orphaned, some were confiscated and others were surrendered by the public. Unless they're needed as evidence in court, all are released as soon as possible – unless they lack survival skills, in which case returning them to the

wild would be a death sentence, either because they'll starve or because, having lost their fear of humans, they're liable to wander into a village and get eaten. (Unless it's a Malay village, that is – Malays, as Muslims, do not consume most rainforest animals).

Among the most celebrated residents of Matang is Aman, one of the largest male orang-utans in the world. Known for his absolutely massive cheek pads, he hit the headlines in 2007 when he became the first of his species to undergo phacoemulsification (cataract surgery). The procedure ended 10 years of blindness, though it did nothing to restore his tongue, removed after he chomped into an electric cable, or his index finger, bitten off by a rival dominant male.

Matang is home to three bearcats (bin-turongs), two of them females, that are too old to be releases. This extraordinary tree-dwelling carnivore, whose closest genetic relative is the seal or walrus, can tuck away a fertilised egg for months and perhaps years, delaying pregnancy until sufficient fruit is available (the trick is called embryonic diapause).

Other animals that live here include two clouded leopards and nine of the happiest captive sun bears in the world. In horrific condition when brought here, they are undergoing a rehabilitation program that's the first of its kind anywhere.

One of Matang's rarest creatures is the false (Malayan) gharial, the most endangered of the 16 species of crocodile. Easily identifiable thanks to its long, thin snout, scientists estimate that only about 2500 are left in the wild.

Rare birds that live here include a buffy (Malay) fish owl, a changeable (crested) hawk-eagle, a white-bellied sea eagle and a confiscated mallard duck (an exotic in these parts!) who's taken to following around a lesser adjutant stork, thinking perhaps that it's his mother.

Many of the centre's caged animals are fed from 9am to 10am.

Trails

HIKING

The **Animal Enclosure Trail** (8.30am-3.30pm) takes visitors through the jungle past animals' enclosures and cages. The 15-minute **Special Trail**, where you can see pitcher plants, is wheelchair accessible. If they've got time, rangers are happy to guide visitors around.

The Pitcher Nature Trail and the Rayu Trail to Kubah National Park are closed

because of the risk of attacks by semi-wild orang-utans.

Volunteering

VOLUNTEERING

(2/4 weeks incl food & lodging US\$2048/2984) For details on paid volunteering – nothing glamorous: we're talking hard physical labour – contact the **Great Orangutan Project** (www.orangutanproject.com) or, at the park, **Leo Bidle** (☎013-845 6531). In keeping with best practice, volunteers have zero direct contact with orang-utans because proximity to people (except a handful of trained staff) will set back their rehabilitation by habituating them to humans.

Sleeping

You can stay in a longhouse-style **Forest Hostel** (4-bed room RM40) with fan and attached bathroom, a spacious, two-room **Type 5 Forest Lodge** (chalet RM150; ☼) that sleeps eight, or a **campground** (per person RM5) equipped with open-air rain shelters (no need to bring a tent, just a mossie net and sheets or a sleeping bag). Book accommodation by phone, online via <http://ebooking.com.my> or at the National Park Booking Office in Kuching.

Eating

At research time there was no place to buy food, so bring your own. Cooking is forbidden in park accommodation but an electric kettle, great for making instant noodles, is available on request.

Getting There & Away

Matang is about 33km northwest of Kuching. By the new road, it is 8km from Kubah National Park HQ. A taxi from Kuching costs RM60 one-way.

Bus K21 from Kuching's Saujana Bus Station to the Politeknik stops near the park entrance. Departures from Kuching are at 8am, 11am, 2pm and 4.30pm.

Bau & Environs

About 26km southwest of Kuching, the one-time gold-mining town of Bau is a good access point to two interesting cave systems and some Bidayuh villages.

WIND CAVE NATURE RESERVE

Situated 5km southwest of Bau, the **Wind Cave** (Gua Angin; ☎082-765472; admission RM5; ☀8.30am-4.30pm) is essentially a network of underground streams. Unlit boardwalks in the form of a figure eight run through the caves, allowing you to wander along the

three main passages (total length: 560m) with chittering bats (both fruit- and insect-eating) swooping overhead.

Near HQ, 300m from the cave entrance, you can cool off with a refreshing swim in the waters of Sungai Sarawak Kanan; changing rooms are available.

Flashlights/torches are available for rent (RM3) – if you get a feeble one, ask to exchange it. No food is sold at the reserve itself, though there is a drinks stand.

i Getting There & Away

To get from Bau to the Wind Cave turn-off (a 1km walk from the cave), take Bus Transport Company (BTC) bus 3 or 3A – they depart about hourly from 7.40am to 5pm except from 1pm to 3pm.

A taxi from Kuching costs RM40 one-way, or RM170 return including the Fairy Cave and three hours of wait time. A tour from Kuching to both caves costs about RM125 per person.

FAIRY CAVE

About 9km southwest of Bau, the **Fairy Cave** (Gua Pari Pari; admission free; ☎24hr) – almost the size of a football pitch and as high as it is wide – is an extraordinary chamber whose entrance is 30m above the ground in the side of a cliff; access is by staircase. Outside, trees grow out of the sheer rock face at impossible angles. Inside, fanciful rock formations, covered with moss, give the cavern an otherworldly aspect, as do the thickets of ferns straining to suck in every photon they can.

Cliff faces near the Fairy Cave, many rated 6a to 7a according to the UK technical grading system, are popular with members of Kuching's friendly rock climbing community, especially on Saturday and Sunday. The sheer white cliff 300m back along the access road from the cave has three easy routes and about 15 wall routes with bolts. Nearest the cave is the Tiger Wall; nearby routes include the Orchid Wall and the Batman Wall. For information on guided rock climbing, contact **Outdoor Treks** (<http://bikcloud.com/rockropes.htm>).

i Getting There & Away

To get from Bau to the Fairy Cave turn-off (a 1.5km walk from the cave), take BTC bus 3A, which runs five times a day.

From Kuching, a taxi to the Fairy Cave costs RM40 one-way, or RM170 return including the Wind Cave and three hours of wait time. A tour from Kuching to both caves costs about RM125 per person.

TRINGGUS & GUNUNG BENGOH

Inland from Bau, most of the population is Bidayuh. Unlike their distant relations on the eastern side of the Bengoh (Bungo) Range – that is, in the area around Padawan and Annah Rais – the Bau Bidayuh have never lived in longhouses. The area's Bidayuh speak a number of distinct dialects.

Tour agencies in Kuching can arrange treks into the valleys around **Gunung Bengoh** (966m) – including the fabled **Hidden Valley** (aka Lost World) – either from the Bau side or the Padawan side. Kuching's Borneo Experiences (p390), for instance, runs treks to the remote and very traditional Bidayuh longhouse community of **Semban**, where a few old ladies still sport brass ankle bracelets. A three-day, two-night trip, including transport, food and a guide, costs RM700/600 per person in a group of two/five.

Tringgus Bong, the furthest-inland of the three Bidayuh hamlets known collectively as Tringgus, has a delightful **homestay** (per person incl food RM60) in House 392; for details, call **Baon** (☎012-882 9489). At the confluence of two burbling streams, facing a hillside pineapple patch and reached by a traditional wood-and-bamboo bridge, this paradisiacal corner of Borneo is a great place to get away from it all. The nearest Indonesian village, across the border in Kalimantan, is just two or three hours away on foot.

Two vans link Bau with Tringgus (RM4) four times a day until the early afternoon – for details, call **Baon** (☎012-882 9489) or **Bayin** (☎014-579 7814).

SEEING MOUNTAINS FROM THE INSIDE

Many of Sarawak's limestone hills are as filled with holes as a Swiss cheese. Boardwalks let you stroll around inside the Wind Cave, the Fairy Cave and the caverns of Niah National Park and Gunung Mulu National Park, but to get off the beaten track you need an experienced guide – someone like UK-born James, who runs **Kuching Caving** (☎012-886 2347; www.kuchingcaving.com). He knows more than almost anyone about the 467 cave entrances that have been found within two hours of Kuching, the longest of which is 11km. For an all-day caving trip, prices start at RM200 per person (minimum four).

Getting There & Away

Bau is 43km southwest of Kuching. The town is linked to Kuching's Saujana Bus Station (RM4.50, 1½ hours) by City Public Link bus B2 (hourly) and also by bus 2 (every 40 minutes), run jointly by Bau Transport Company (BTC) and Sarawak Transport Company (STC).

Lundu

The quiet town of Lundu, an overgrown fishing village about 55km west of Kuching, is the gateway to Gunung Gading National Park.

The road north out of town leads not only to Gunung Gading National Park but also to two beaches that are popular with Kuchingites on weekends and holidays. Romantic, coconut palm-fringed **Pantai Pandan**, 11km north of Lundu, is one of Sarawak's nicest beaches (despite the sandflies), with a gentle gradient that's perfect for kids. A few beachfront huts sell eats and drinks. Camping is possible. **Pantai Siar**, 8km north of Lundu, is home to several small resorts that appeal mainly to the domestic market.

Otto Steinmayer, an American-born literature professor who lives in – and loves – Lundu, has an interesting website, www.ikanlundu.com.

Sleeping


Retreat

RESORT \$\$

(☎082-453027; www.sbeu.org.my; Pantai Siar; Sun-Fri/Sat chalet from RM158/248;   ) Owned by the Sarawak Bank Employees Union, this is the ideal place to mix chilling on the beach with workers' solidarity. The grassy, family-friendly campus has 38 comfortable rooms, including 21 chalets, and gets enthusiastic reviews from travellers. Day use of the pool costs RM15/5 for adults/children; the beach itself is free. Situated 8km from Lundu.

Lundu Gading Hotel

HOTEL \$

(☎082-735199; 174 Lundu Bazaar; d RM60; ) Few hotels have less style sense than Lundu's only hostel, whose 10 rooms sport blue-tile floors, brightly coloured towels, big windows and peeling ceilings. Situated diagonally across the street from the RHB Bank.

Eating

Happy Seafood Centre

SEAFOOD \$

(mains from RM4.50; ☎7am-8pm) A very informal, open-air eatery with surprisingly good fish. Facing the bus station.

Fruit & Veggie Market

HAWKER CENTRE \$

(mains RM4; ☎8am-5pm) Chinese and Malay dishes are available upstairs. Situated across the grassy triangular square from the bus station.

Malay Night Market

FOOD STALLS \$

(☎5-10pm) Supposed to move from the Fruit & Veggie Market to the riverfront.

Getting There & Away

Buses run by the Sarawak Transport Company (STC) link Kuching Sentral long-haul bus station (counter 20) with Lundu (RM12, 1½ hours); departures in both directions are at 8am, 11am, 2pm and 4pm.

At the Lundu bus station, it's possible to hire a private car (RM5 per person) to take you to Gunung Gading National Park or Sematan.

Gunung Gading National Park

The best place in Sarawak to see the world's largest flower, the renowned rafflesia, **Gunung Gading National Park** (☎082-735144; www.sarawakforestry.com; adult RM20; ☎8am-5pm) makes a fine day trip from Kuching. Its old-growth rainforest covers the slopes of four mountains (*gunung*) – Gading, Lundu, Perigi and Sebuloh – traversed by well-marked walking trails that are great for day hikes. The park is an excellent spot to experience the incredible biodiversity of lowland mixed dipterocarp forest, so named because it is dominated by a family of trees, the Dipterocarpaceae, whose members are particularly valuable for timber and thus especially vulnerable to clear-cutting.

The star attraction at 41-sq-km Gunung Gading is the *Rafflesia tuan-mudae*, a species that's endemic to Sarawak. Up to 75cm in diameter, they flower pretty much year-round but unpredictably, so to see one you'll need some luck. To find out if a Rafflesia is in bloom – something that happens here with human knowledge only about 25 times a year – and how long it will stay that way (never more than five days), contact the park or call or visit the National Park Booking Office in Kuching.

Sights & Activities

A variety of well-marked, often steep trails lead through the lush jungle. Park signs give *one-way* hike times. Except when instructed

otherwise by a ranger, keep to the trails to avoid crushing *Rafflesia* buds underfoot.

Don't count on seeing many animals as most species found here are nocturnal and wisely prefer the park's upper reaches, safely away from nearby villages.

Since these hikes must be done in one day (camping is permitted only at park HQ), you might want to arrive the day before to facilitate an early morning start.

Rafflesia Loop Trail

WALKING

(RM30 per hour for a group of up to 10) This 620m-long trail, which begins 50m down the slope from park HQ, goes through a stretch of forest that *Rafflesias* find especially convivial. Since most of the blooms are off the path, finding them requires hiring a ranger.

Hiking Circuit

HIKING

For views of the South China Sea, you can follow a circuit that incorporates the **Viewpoint Trail** (follow the red-and-yellow stripes painted on trees), the **Lintang Trail** (red stripes) and the **Reservoir Trail** (a cement stairway).

Gunung Gading

HIKING

Trekking up Gunung Gading (906m; trail-marked in red and yellow after Waterfall 7) takes seven to eight hours return, but don't expect panoramic views – the summit is thickly forested so you'll see mainly the bottom of the rainforest canopy. Somewhere atop the mountain are the ruins of a British army camp used during the Konfrontasi. At **Batu Berkubu** (10 to 12 hours return; trail-marked in red and blue), you can see a communist hideout from the same period.

Waterfalls


SWIMMING

Three lovely cascades are easily accessible along the **Main Trail** (market in red and white). You can take a dip at **Waterfall 1**, **Waterfall 7** (1.5km from park HQ) and the **swimming hole**, fed by a crystal-clear mountain stream, at the beginning of the *Rafflesia* Loop Trail.

Sleeping & Eating

The busiest times are weekends, school holidays and when a *Rafflesia* is blooming. Bookings can be made online via <http://ebooking.com.my>, or by phone or in person through the National Park Booking Office in Kuching. Nearby Lundu has one hotel.

The **hostel** (dm/r RM15/40) has four fan rooms, each with four beds, and shared bathroom facilities. Each of the two three-

bedroom **Forest Lodges** (RM150; ) sleeps up to six people. **Camping** (per person RM5) is possible at the park HQ, a bathroom-equipped site.

A canteen (cafeteria) is supposed to open soon inside the new park HQ building. Cooking is permitted in the chalets and the hostel. Another culinary option: driving or strolling about 2.5km to Lundu.

Getting There & Away

Gunung Gading National Park is 85km northwest of Kuching.

Four public buses a day link Kuching Sentral long-distance bus station with Lundu, but from there you'll either have to walk north 2.5km to the park, or hire an unofficial taxi (about RM5 per person).

A tour from Kuching costs about RM230 per person including lunch (minimum two people) – for a group, that's much more than chartering a taxi for the day (about RM250).

Sematan

The quiet fishing town of Sematan, Sarawak's westernmost town, serves as the gateway to Tanjung Datu National Park. The nearby Indonesian border – yes, those forested mountains are in Kalimantan – is not (yet) open to tourists.

Sights & Activities

A grassy north-south **promenade** lines the waterfront, where a concrete **pier** affords wonderful views of the mouth of the river, its sand banks and the very blue, very clear South China Sea. The deserted beaches of **Telok Pugu**, a narrow spit of land across the mouth of the Sematan River from Sematan's jetty, can be reached by boat (RM30 return).


At the northern end of the row of stores facing the waterfront, check out the shop called **Teck Huat** (shops 1, 2 & 3), which hasn't changed in over a century. Built of *belian*, it still has wooden shutters instead of windows.

The sands of shallow **Pantai Sematan**, clean and lined with coconut palms, stretch along the coast northwest of town. It is home to several resorts that fill up with Kuchingites on the weekends.

Sleeping

Sematan Hotel

HOTEL \$

(☎013-828 1068, 082-711162; 162 Sematan Bazaar; d RM50; ) The nine very basic rooms, all upstairs, have tile floors and rudimentary

furnishings. Bathrooms are attached but lack hot water. Situated 150m inland from the six columns on the waterfront. If no one's around, look for the owner in the Seaview Cafe across the street.

Getting There & Away

Sematan is 107km northwest of Kuching, 25km northwest of Lundu and 30km (by sea) from Tanjung Datu National Park.

Bus routes link Kuching's Regional Express Bus Terminal with Lundu but from there you'll have to catch a ride with locals or hire an unofficial taxi (about RM30 one-way) at the bus station.

Tanjung Datu National Park

Occupying a remote, rugged peninsula at Sarawak's far northwestern tip, this 14-sq-km **national park** (www.sarawakforestry.com; adult RM20) features endangered mixed dipterocarp rainforest, jungle trails that hear few footfalls, crystal-clear seas, unspoiled coral reefs and near-pristine white-sand beaches on which endangered turtles occasionally lay their eggs. Few visitors make the effort and brave the expense to travel out here, but those who do often come away absolutely enchanted.

The park has four trails, including the **Telok Melano Trail** from the Malay fishing village of Telok Melano (a demanding 2.7km), linked to Sematan by boat; and the **Belian Trail**, which goes to the summit of 542m-high **Gunung Melano** (2km, one hour) and affords breathtaking views of the coastlines of Indonesia and Malaysia. To spot nocturnal animals, you can take a night walk on your own or with a ranger (it's good form to tip him RM20).

Snorkelling (but not scuba diving) is allowed in certain areas; details are available at park HQ. Bring your own equipment, including water shoes (the coral can be sharp).

Celcom and Digi (but not Maxis) cell-phone signals can be picked up about 15 minutes' walk from park HQ, along the beach.

Recent travellers report encountering giant stingrays.

Sleeping & Eating

Park HQ offers four basic **guest rooms** (d/tr RM40/55) with electricity from 6pm to midnight and four open-sided, electricity-less **shelters** (per person RM15), each with

space for three people. Blankets, sheets and mosquito nets are available for RM15. There's no way to book ahead – just show up.

For details on **homestays** (per person incl board RM70 to RM80) in Telok Melano, a steep, 2½-hour walk from park HQ, contact the National Park Booking Office in Kuching or ask around at the Sematan jetty.

Visitors must bring their own food. Cooking equipment can be rented for RM10 a day; cooking gas costs RM5.

Getting There & Away

The only way to get to Tanjung Datu National Park or the nearby village of Telok Melano, both about 30km northwest of Sematan, is by boat (one to 1½ hours). Weather and waves permitting, locals often (but not necessarily every day) pile into a motorboat and head from Telok Melano to Sematan early in the morning, returning in the early afternoon (around 2pm or 3pm). If you join them, expect to pay RM30 to RM40 per person one-way. Sea conditions are generally good from February or March or October. The rest of the year (especially December), the sea can be rough, so much so that on some days boats don't run. Walking to Telok Melano – the only other way to get there – takes a full day.

Motorboats with room for five to eight people, either for a day trip (RM450 return) or an overnight (RM500 return), can be hired at the Sematan jetty for travel either to the park or to Telok Melano. To find a boatman, ask around the jetty or call or email **Eric Yap** at the **Fairview Guesthouse** (☎013-801 1561; www.thefairview.com.my; Kuching).

You can also arrange trips through the **Fisheries Development Authority** (Persatuan Nelayan Kawasan Sematan/Lundu; ☎082-711152; for Rosdin Mawi deenazy@yahoo.com.my; Jln Bauxite, Sematan; ☎8am-5pm Mon-Fri). From the jetty, walk 100m south and a bit inland; the office is upstairs.

Talang-Satang National Park

Sarawak's first **marine park** (www.sarawakforestry.com), established in 1999 to protect four species of marine turtle, consists of the coastline and waters around four islands: the two **Pulau Satang**, known as *besar* (big) and *kecil* (small), which are 16km west of the Santubong Peninsula; and, 45km to the northwest, the two **Pulau Talang-Talang**, also *besar* and *kecil*, situated 8km due north of Sematan Beach.

Once every four or five years, female marine turtles swim vast distances – sometimes thousands of kilometres – to lay their eggs on the exact same beach where they themselves hatched. Of every 20 turtles that come ashore in Sarawak to lay eggs, 19 do so on a beach in 19.4-sq-km Talang-Satang National Park. But of the 10,000 eggs a female turtle may lay over the course of her life, which can last 100 years, only one in a thousand is likely to survive into adulthood. To increase these odds, park staff patrol the beaches every night during the egg-laying season (mainly June and July, with fewer in August and a handful in April, May and September) and either transfer the eggs to guarded hatcheries or post guards to watch over them *in situ*.

Snorkelling and diving are permitted but only within certain designated areas, and divers must be accompanied by an approved guide.

PULAU SATANG

While the national park's conservation area is managed by Sarawak Forestry, the islands themselves are the property of a family from Telaga Air – their 999-year lease, granted by the last White Rajah, Charles Vyner Brooke, expires in the year 2945. About 100 cousins now share ownership, but day-to-day management has devolved to Abol Hassan Johari, a retired accountant who lives in Telaga Air and is much more interested in conservation and research than in tourists. His family retains customary rights to the turtles' eggs but these are 'sold' to the state government and the money donated to an orphanage.

The larger of the two islands, 1-sq-km **Pulau Satang Besar**, has a fine beach and a small wooden shelter. Lucky overnight visitors can sometimes watch fragile eggs being moved from the beach to a hatchery and, possibly, witness baby turtles being released into the wild.

Abol's resolutely non-commercial approach to the island, and the exigencies of conservation, mean that while you can theoretically overnight on Pulau Satang Besar, which is 14km northwest of Telaga Air, you probably can't as green turtles, hawksbill turtles, olive ridley turtles, leatherback turtles, researchers and students (in that order) are given priority.

PULAU TALANG-TALANG

The two Pulau Talang-Talang, accessible from Sematan or as a stop on the boat trip

from Sematan to Tanjung Datu National Park, can be visited only during the day. You're allowed to land but swimming is forbidden within the core protected zone (anywhere within a 2km radius of the islands' highest point).

With the park's **Sea Turtle Volunteer Programme** (4 days & 3 nights RM2850; ☺ Jun-Sep), paying volunteers can stay on Pulau Talang-Talang Besar and help the staff of the Turtle Conservation Station patrol beaches, transfer eggs to the hatchery and even release hatchlings. For details, contact the National Park Booking Office in Kuching; booking is through Kuching-based tour agents such as Borneo Adventure (p390).

Getting There & Away

The easiest way to visit the islands is to book a tour with a Kuching-based agency or to contact Eric Yap at Kuching's **Fairview Guesthouse** (☎082-240017; www.fairview.my), who has connections up and down the coast.

Day-trip charters (RM400 per person) to Pulau Satang can be arranged through tour agencies. Boats usually set out from the coastal villages of Telaga Air, 10km northeast (as the crow flies) from Kubah National Park.

If you hire a boat to get from Sematan to Telok Melano or Tanjung Datu National Park (RM450 return), you can arrange with the boatman to stop at Pulau Talang-Talang for an additional fee of RM10 per person. Hiring a boat for a day trip from Sematan costs RM250.

BATANG AI REGION

Ask anyone in Kuching where to find old-time longhouses – that is, those least impacted by modern life – and the answer is almost always the same: Batang Ai, many of whose settlements can only be reached by boat. This remote region, about 250km (4½ hours by road) southeast of Kuching, is not really visitable without a guide, but if you're genuinely interested in encountering Iban culture, the money and effort to get out here will be richly rewarded.

Managed with the help of an Iban community cooperative, the 240-sq-km **Batang Ai National Park** (www.sarawakforestry.com) is part of a vast contiguous area of protected rainforest that includes the Batang Ai Reservoir (24 sq km), Sarawak's Lanjak Entimau Wildlife Sanctuary (1688 sq km) and, across the border in West Kalimantan, Betung Kerihun National Park (8000 sq km). The park's dipterocarp rainforests have the highest density of wild orang-utans in central

Borneo (sightings are not guaranteed but are not rare either), and are also home to gibbons (more often heard than seen), langurs and hornbills.

Trips to the Batang Ai region can be booked in Kuching, either through a tour operator or with a freelance guide.

CENTRAL SARAWAK

Stretching from Sibü, on the lower Batang Rejang, upriver to Kapit and Bintulu and northeastward along the coast to Bintulu and Miri, Sarawak's midsection offers some great river journeys, fine national parks and modern urban conveniences.

Sibü

POP 255,000

Gateway to the Batang Rejang, Sibü has grown rich from trade with Sarawak's interior since the time of James Brooke. These days, although the 'swan city' does not rival Kuching in terms of charm, it's not a bad place to spend a day or two before or after a boat trip to the wild interior.

Situated 60km upriver from the open sea, Sibü is Sarawak's most Chinese city. Many of the two-thirds of locals who trace their roots to China are descendents of migrants who came from Foochow (Fujian or Fuzhou) province in the early years of the 20th century. The city was twice destroyed by fire, in 1889 and 1928. Much of Sibü's modern-day wealth can be traced to the timber trade.

Sights

Strolling around the city centre (roughly, the area bounded by Tua Pek Kong Temple, Wisma Sanyan, Sibü Gateway and the Li Hua Hotel) is a good way to get a feel for Sibü's fast-beating commercial pulse. Drop by the tourist office for a brochure covering the new **Sibü Heritage Trail**.

Features of architectural interest include the old **shophouses** around the Visitors Information Centre, eg along Jln Tukang Besi, and the old **Rex Cinema** (Map p418; Jln Ramin), where art deco meets shophouse functionality.

Tua Pek Kong Temple

TEMPLE

(Map p418; Jln Temple; ☉6.30am-8pm) Established sometime before 1871 and damaged by Allied bombs in 1945, this colourful riverfront temple incorporates both a Taoist hall

on the ground floor, and a Chinese Buddhist sanctuary on the 1st floor. For a brilliant view over the town and up and down the muddy Batang Rejang, climb the seven-storey **Kuan Yin Pagoda**, built in 1987; the best time is sunset when a wheeling swirl of swiftlets buzzes the tower at eye level. Ask English-speaking Mrs Lee, at the ground-floor desk, for the key; as you ascend, don't forget to lock the gate behind you.

Sibü Heritage Centre

MUSEUM

(Map p418; Jln Central; ☉9am-5pm, closed Mon & public holidays) Housed in a gorgeously airy municipal complex built in 1960, this excellent museum explores the captivating history of Sarawak and Sibü. Panels, rich in evocative photographs, take a look at the various Chinese dialect groups, Sarawak's communist insurgency (1965-90), Sibü's Christian (including Methodist) traditions, and even local opposition to Sarawak's incorporation into Malaysia in 1963. Don't miss the photo of a 1940s street dentist – it's painful just to look at.

Rejang Esplanade

PARK

(Map p418; Jln Maju; ☉24hr) One of Sibü's 22 community parks – most donated by Chinese clan associations – this pleasant strip of riverfront grass affords views of the wide, muddy river and its motley procession of fishing boats, tugs, timber-laden barges and 'flying coffin' express boats.

Lau King Howe Memorial Museum

MUSEUM

(Jln Pulau; ☉9am-5pm, closed Mon) One glance at this medical museum's exhibits and you'll be glad saving your life never required the application of early-20th-century drills, saws and stainless-steel clamps – or the use of a ferocious gadget called a 'urological retractor'. Another highlight: an exhibit on the evolution of local nurses' uniforms that some visitors may find kinky. Situated about 500m northwest of Wisma Sanyan.

Bawang Assan Longhouse Village

LONGHOUSE

An Iban village one hour downstream from Sibü (by road the trip takes just 40 minutes), Bawang Assan has nine 'hybrid' longhouses (ie longhouses that combine traditional and 21st-century elements). To stay here without going through a Sibü-based tour company, contact the **Bawang Assan Homestay Programme** (☎014-582 8105; <http://ibanlonghousestay.blogspot.com>; per person incl 3 meals RM110); ask for Marcathy Gindau, who can often be

Sibu

SARAWAK SIBU



found in Sibu at the **Lehdo Inn** (Map p418; ☎084-331894; 21 Jln Tukang Besi). To arrange transport by van, call **Mr Broken** (☎019-836 1134).



Tours

Two well-regarded Sibu-based travel agencies offer tours of the city and visits to sights both upriver and down.

Greatown Travel

TOUR

(☎084-211243, 084-219243; www.greatowntravel.com; No 6, 1st fl, Lg Chew Siik Hiong 1A) Offers long-house stays (eg at Bawang Assan and in the

Kapit area), visits to the 'Melanau heartland' around Mukah, and various other trips lasting three to six days. Staff are happy to tailor-make bespoke itineraries. Its office is about 1km northeast of the centre along Jln Pedada.

Great Holiday Travel

TOUR

(☎084-348196; www.ghtborneo.com; No 23, 1st fl, Pusat Pedada, Jln Pedada) Based out near the long-distance bus station, this outfit can organise half-day walking tours of Sibu, a day trip or overnight to Bawang Assan Longhouse Village, and two-day trips up to the Kapit area. Reasonably priced.

Sibu

Top Sight

- Sibu Heritage Centre B2
Tua Pek Kong Temple A3

Sights

- 1 Rejang Esplanade C4
2 Rex Cinema B2

Sleeping

- 3 Lehdo Inn B2
4 Li Hua Hotel D4
5 Premier Hotel C2
6 River Park Hotel D4
7 Tanahmas Hotel C2

Eating

- 8 Café Café B3
9 Islamic Nyonya Kafé B1
10 Kopitiam C4
New Capitol Restaurant (see 5)
11 Night Market (Chinese Stalls) B2
12 Night Market (Malay Stalls) B2
13 Sibu Central Market B3
14 Vegetarian Food Stall B2

Drinking

- Queen (see 8)

Shopping

- Public Book Store (see 15)
15 Wisma Sanyan A1

Festivals

Borneo Cultural Festival

CULTURE

(☺10 days in early Jul) Brings to town music, dance, cultural performances and food representing Central Sarawak's Chinese, Malay-Melanau and Dayak traditions.

Sleeping

Sibu has dozens of hotels. Some of the ultra-budget places (ie those charging less than RM35 a room) are of a very low standard and double as brothels. Not long ago some Japanese tourists were bitten by rats while staying in one local dive!

TOP CHOICE Li Hua Hotel

HOTEL \$\$

(Map p418; ☎084-324000; www.lihua.com.my; cnr Jln Maju & Lg Lanang 2; s/d/ste from RM50/65/150; 🍷🍷🍷) Sibu's best-value hotel has 68 spotless, tile-floor rooms spread out over nine storeys and staff that are both highly professional and friendly. Lift-equipped. Especially convenient if you're arriving or leaving by boat. Book by phone or email.

Tanahmas Hotel

HOTEL \$\$

(Map p418; ☎084-333188; www.tanahmas.com.my; Jln Kampung Nyabor; s/d RM250/270; 🍷🍷🍷) As comfortable as it is central, with 114 spacious rooms. Amenities include a small fitness centre and an open-air pool, both on the 3rd floor.

Premier Hotel

HOTEL \$\$

(Map p418; ☎084-323222; www.premierh.com.my; Jln Kampung Nyabor; s/d from RM209/244; 🍷🍷) Offers 189 really nice, comfortable rooms in prime downtown location. About what you'd expect for this price – think 3½ stars. Four of the 10 floors are non-smoking.

River Park Hotel

HOTEL \$

(Map p418; ☎016-578 2820; sievwing1983@hotmail.com; 51-53 Jln Maju; d/tr/q from RM68/95/110; 🍷🍷) A well-run, 30-room hotel in a convenient riverside location. A decent option if the Li Hua Hotel is full.

Eating

Sibu is famous for Foochow-style Chinese dishes such as *kam pua mee* (thin noodle strands soaked in pork fat and served with a side of roast pork), the city's signature dish, and *kompia* (sesame-flecked mini-bagels filled with pork).

TOP CHOICE Sibu Central Market

MARKET \$

(Pasar Sentral Sibu; Map p418; RM2.50-5; ☺food stalls 3am-midnight) Malaysia's largest fruit and veggie market has more than 1000 stalls. Upstairs, Chinese-, Malay- and a few Iban-owned food stalls serve up local specialities, including porridge (available early in the morning and at night), *kam pua mee* (available at most of the noodle shops, but some of the best is on offer at evening-only Stall 102) and *kompia* (check out Stall 17 and Stall FL12, which faces Stall 91; both are open from 7am to 5pm). Most of the noodle stalls close around noon. Got questions? Head to Stall 98 and ask for Noriza.

SWANS

While Kuching's mascot is, famously, the cat, Sibu's is the swan, an 'ancient Chinese symbol of good fortune and health, an auspicious omen for a community living in harmony, peace and goodwill'. Keep an eye out for swan statues as you wander around town.

Café Café

FUSION \$\$

(Map p418; 10 Jln Chew Geok Lin; mains RM10-38, set weekday lunch RM10-15; ☺ noon-4pm & 6-11.30pm, closed Mon; ☺) Chic enough to create a buzz in Kuching (or Melbourne), Café Café serves outstanding fusion fare, including Nyonya-style chicken, amid decor that mixes Balinese, Chinese and Western elements. Vegetarian dishes are available upon request.

Islamic Nyonya Kafé

PERANAKAN \$\$

(Map p418; 141 Jln Kampung Nyabor; mains RM8-18; ☺ 10am-11pm; ☺☺) Serves the deliciously spicy dishes of the Straits Chinese, including *ayam halia* (ginger chicken) and *kari kambing* (mutton curry). 'Islamic' means it's halal. Has great lunch deals (RM5.90 to RM9.90) from 11am to 2pm.

New Capitol Restaurant

CHINESE \$\$

(Map p418; 46 Jln Kampung Nyabor; mains RM10-30; ☺ 11am-2pm & 5-9pm) A classy, old-school Chinese restaurant. Among foochow specialities are sea cucumber soup (RM15), bean curd oyster soup (RM8) and duck with red fermented rice (RM30).

Night Market

FOOD STALLS \$

(Pasar Malam; Jln Market; ☺ 5pm-midnight) **Chinese stalls** (Map p418), selling pork and rice, steamed buns etc, are at the western end of the lot, while **Malay stalls** (Map p418) (with superb satay and scrumptious BBQ chicken) are to the northeast. Also has a few Iban-run places.

Kopitiam

CAFE \$

(Map p418; mains RM3.30-6; ☺ 6am-4pm) Several old-time *kopitiam* (coffee shops) can be found along Jln Maju, between the Express Ferry Terminal and the Li Hua Hotel. In the morning, locals gather to dine on Foochow specialities, read Chinese newspapers and chat – a typical Sarawakian scene.

Vegetarian Food Stall

VEGETARIAN \$

(Map p418; Jln Central; mains RM3.50; ☺ 7.30am-2.30pm Mon-Sat; ☺) In the small hawker centre on the ground floor of the Sibü Heritage Centre.

**Drinking**

Much of what passes for nightlife in Sibü involves cover versions of Western hits and scantily clad young women.

Queen

BAR

(Map p418; 12 Jln Chew Geok Lin; beer from RM10, cocktails RM22-38; ☺ 4pm-12.30am, closed Mon) Decked out like a Victorian sitting room,

this chic, dimly lit bar features plush couches and overstuffed wing chairs in black and burgundy velvet. Stop by from 9pm to 11.30pm for live guitar and/or keyboard music. Food can be ordered from Café Café next door.

**Shopping****Public Book Store**

BOOKS

(Map p418; Level 4, Wisma Sanyan, 1 Jln Sanyan; ☺ 9am-9pm) The best bookstore in town, with a decent selection of English books. The mall, Wisma Sanyan, is owned by the Sanyan Group, a vast and politically well-connected timber company.

**Information**

Email Centre (ground fl, Sarawak House Complex, cnr Jln Central & Jln Kampung Nyabor; per hr RM4; ☺ 9.30am-9pm Mon-Sat, to 3pm Sun) Internet access. The entrance is on the building's northern side.

ibrowse Netcafé (Shop 4.21, Level 4, Wisma Sanyan, 1 Jln Sanyan; per hr RM3; ☺ 9.30am-9.30pm) Internet access.

Main Post Office (Jln Kampung Nyabor; ☺ 8am-4pm Mon-Fri, to 3.30pm Sat) Changes cash.

Rejang Medical Centre (☎ 084-330733; www.rejang.com.my; 29 Jln Pedada) Used by most expats and tourists. Has 24-hour emergency services, including an ambulance. Situated about 1km northeast of the Sibü Gateway.

Sibü General Hospital (☎ 084-343333; http://hsibu.moh.gov.my; Jln Ulu Oya, Km 5-1/2) Situated 8km east of the centre, towards the airport.

Visitors Information Centre (☎ 084-340980; www.sarawaktourism.com; 32 Jln Tukang Besi; ☺ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri, closed public holidays) Well worth a stop. Has a friendly and informative staff (ask for Jessie), plenty of maps, bus and ferry schedules, and brochures on travel around Sarawak.

Yewon Money Changer (8 Jln Tukang Besi; ☺ 8.30am or 9am-5pm Mon-Sat) Changes cash. Look for the gold-on-red sign.

**Getting There & Away****Air**

MASwings (www.maswings.com.my) has inexpensive services to Kuching, Bintulu, Miri and Kota Kinabalu (KK). **Malaysia Airlines** (www.malaysiaairlines.com) flies to Kuala Lumpur (KL), and **AirAsia** (www.airasia.com) flies to Kuching (40 minutes), KL and Johor Bahru (across the causeway from Singapore).

Boat

At the entrance to the **Express Ferry Terminal** (Jln Kho Peng Long, Terminal Penumpang Sibu; 船), ferry company booths indicate departure times using large clocks. Be on board 15 minutes before departure time – boats have been known to set sail early.

TO KAPIT & BELAGA

'Flying coffin' express boats head up the Batang Rejang to Kapit (RM20 to RM30, 140km, 2½ to three hours) once or twice an hour from 5.45am to 2.30pm. Water levels at the Pelagus Rapids permitting (for details, call Mr Wong at 013-806 1333), one boat a day, departing at 5.45am, goes all the way to Belaga, 155km upriver from Kapit (RM55, 11 hours).

TO KUCHING

Unless you fly, the quickest way to get from Sibu to Kuching is by boat. **Ekspress Bahagia** (船) in Kuching 016-889 3013, 082-412246, in Sibu 016-800 5891, 084-319228 runs a daily express ferry to/from Kuching's Express Wharf (RM45, five hours) that passes through an Amazonian dystopia of abandoned sawmills and rust-bucket tramp steamers. Departures are 11.30am from Sibu and at 8.30am from Kuching. It's a good idea to book a day ahead.

Bus

Sibu's **long-distance bus station** (Jln Pahlawan) is about 3.5km northeast of the centre along Jln Pedada. A variety of companies send buses to Kuching (RM50 to RM60, seven to eight hours, regular departures between 6.15am and 4am), Miri (RM50, 6½ hours, roughly hourly from 6am to 3.30am) and Bintulu (RM25, 3¼ hours, roughly hourly from 6am to 3.30am).

Getting Around

To/From the Airport

Sibu Airport is 23km east of the city centre; a taxi costs RM35.

From the local bus station, the Panduan Hemat bus to Sibu Jaya passes by the airport junction (RM2.70, every hour or two from 6am to 7.15pm), which is five minutes on foot from the terminal.

Bus

To get from the local bus station (in front of the Express Ferry Terminal) to the long-distance bus station, take Lanang Bus 20 or 21 (RM1.20, 15 minutes, once or twice an hour 6.30am to 5.15pm).

Taxi

Taxis can be ordered 24 hours a day at 084-320773 or 084-311286. Taking a taxi from the city centre to the long-distance bus station costs RM13.

Batang Rejang

A trip up the tan, churning waters of 640km-long Batang Rejang (Rejang River) – the 'Amazon of Borneo' – is one of Southeast Asia's great river journeys. Express ferries barrel through the currents, eddies and whirlpools, the pilots expertly dodging angular black boulders half-hidden in the roiling waters. Though the area is no longer the jungle-lined wilderness it was in the days before Malaysian independence, it retains a frontier, *ulu-ulu* (upriver, ie back-of-the-beyond) vibe, especially in towns and longhouses accessible only by boat.

To get a sense of the extent of logging and oil palm monoculture, check out Google Earth.

LONGHOUSE VISITS

Many of the indigenous people of the Batang Rejang basin, both Iban and members of Orang Ulu groups such as the Kenyah, Kayan, Lahanan, Punan and Sekapan, still live in longhouses. While most aren't as traditional as travellers may envision, visiting one can be a great way to interact with some of Borneo's indigenous people.

Based on geography, Kapit and Belaga *should* be good bases from which to set out to explore longhouses along the upper Batang Rejang and its tributaries. Unfortunately, we've been hearing about two sorts of difficulties faced by some recent travellers:

Visiting longhouses without an invitation or a guide is becoming more complicated as traditional Dayak norms, according to which visitors are always welcome, are giving way to more 'modern' (ie commercial) ideas.

Some area tour guides and van drivers demand inflated prices and/or provide services that aren't up to standard. For instance, visitors may be dropped off at a longhouse with nothing to do and no way to communicate with the residents until they're picked up the next day.

In short, it can sometimes be difficult to find a guide who has good local knowledge and contacts, speaks English and charges reasonable prices. Some travellers report being invited by locals to their longhouses – but that's not something you can count on. One good option is to make arrangements through one of the tour agencies based in Sibu. For up-to-date feedback from other travellers, check out Lonely Planet's Thorn Tree forum (www.lonelyplanet.com).

i Getting Around

Pretty much the only transport arteries into and around the Batang Rejang region are rivers. A road from Kapit to Kanowit (already connected to Sarawak's highway network) is being built and a rough logging road already connects Bintulu with Belaga, so come before easy land access changes this part of Borneo forever.

Boats can navigate the perilous Pelagus Rapids, between Kapit and Belaga, only when the water level is high enough – these days, determined mainly by how much water is released from the Bakun Dam. In an attempt to make navigation safer and less subject to fluctuating water levels, the government has recently been attaching explosive charges to some of the boulders that create the Pelagus Rapids and blowing them to smithereens.

Express river boats – nicknamed 'flying coffin' because of their shape, not their safety record – run by half-a-dozen companies head up the broad, muddy Batang Rejang from Sibü with goods and luggage strapped precariously to the roof. If you opt to ride up top for the view (not that we recommend it...), hang on tight! The passenger cabins tend to be air-conditioned to near-arctic frigidity.

From Sibü, boats to Kapit (140km, 2½ to three hours) leave once or twice an hour from 5.45am to 2.30pm; from Kapit, boats heading down to Sibü depart between 6.40am and 3.15pm. If you travel 2nd or 3rd class (RM20), boarding is likely to involve inching your way along a narrow, rail-less exterior gangway; 1st- (RM30) and business-class (RM25) passengers board near the prow.

If the water level at the Pelagus Rapids (32km upriver from Kapit) is high enough (for the latest low-down, call Mr Wong in Sibü at 013-806 1333 or Daniel Levoh in Belaga at 013-848 6351), one 77-seat **express boat** (☎013-806 1333) a day

goes all the way to Belaga, 155km upriver from Kapit, stopping at various longhouses along the way. Heading upriver, departures are at 5.45am from Sibü (RM55, 11 hours) and 9.30am from Kapit (RM35, 4½ hours). Coming downriver, the boat leaves Belaga at about 7.30am. When the river is too low, the only way to get to Belaga is overland via Bintulu!

KAPIT

POP 14,000

The main upriver settlement on the Batang Rejang, Kapit is a bustling trading and transport centre dating back to the days of the White Rajahs. A number of nearby longhouses can be visited by road or river but the pickings are thin when it comes to finding a good local guide.

Fans of Redmond O'Hanlon's *Into the Heart of Borneo* may remember Kapit as the starting point of the author's jungle adventures.

👁 Sights & Activities

Fort Sylvia

MUSEUM

(Map p424; Jln Kubu; ☀10am-noon & 2-5pm, closed Mon & public holidays) Built by Charles Brooke in 1880 to take control of the Upper Rejang and to keep the peace, this wooden fort – built of *belian* – was renamed in 1925 to honour Raneé Sylvia, wife of Charles Vyner Brooke. On the facade, lines mark the high-water marks of historic floods, one of which crested at an incredible 19m above normal. Inside, the exhibits offer a pretty good intro to the traditional lifestyles of the Batang Rejang Dayaks and include evocative photos of the colonial era. A worthwhile stop before you head to a longhouse.

UPPER REJANG TRAVEL PERMITS

Theoretically, a free, two-week permit is required for all travel:

- » Along the Batang Rejang to points upriver from the Pelagus Rapids (32km upstream from Kapit).
- » Up the Batang Boleh, which flows into the Batang Rejang 9km upriver from Kapit.

In fact, we've never heard of anyone having their permit checked, and the whole arrangement seems to be a bureaucratic holdover from the time when the government sought to limit foreign activists' access to Dayak communities threatened by logging or the controversial Bakun Dam. Permits are not required, even in theory, if you travel to Belaga overland from Bintulu.

Permits are issued in Kapit at the **Resident's Office** (☎084-796230; www.kapitro.sarawak.gov.my; 9th fl, Kompleks Kerajaan Negeri Bahagian Kapit, Jln Bleth; ☀8am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Thu, 8-11.45am & 2.15-5pm Fri), in a nine-storey building 2km west of the centre. To get there, take a van (RM1.50) from the southeast corner of Pasar Teresang. To get back to town, ask the lobby guards for help catching a ride (offer to pay the driver).

Waterfront

(Map p424; PORT Kapit's waterfront is lined with ferries, barges, longboats and floating docks, all swarming with people. Porters carry impossibly heavy or unwieldy loads – we've seen 15 egg crates stacked in a swaying pile – up the steep steps from the wharfs.

Pasar Teresang

(Map p424; MARKET ☎5.30am-6pm) Some of the goods unloaded at the waterfront end up in this colourful covered market. It's a chatty, noisy hive of grass-roots commerce, with a galaxy of unfamiliar edibles that grow in the jungle, as well as handicrafts. Orang Ulu people sell fried treats and steamed buns.

Tours

LONGHOUSE TOURS

Longhouses, many of them quite modern and some accessible by road (river travel is both slower and pricier than going by minibus), can be found along the Batang Baleh, which conflows with the Batang Rejang 9km upstream from Kapit, and the Sungai Sut, a tributary of the Batang Baleh. Longhouses along these rivers tend to be more traditional (ie still have hunted heads on display) than their counterparts along the mainline Batang Rejang.

The problem is finding a good guide. Tours run by **Alice Chua** (☎019-859 3126; atta_kpt@yahoo.com), Kapit's only licensed guide, are pricey and, frankly, do not get rave reviews. You could also ask at your hotel for recommendations. A few lucky travellers get invitations from locals!

According to the Kapit Resident's Office, the license of one local guide has been revoked for cause. Despite this, he continues to approach visitors, some of whom have made complaints. Because licensed guides are rare in Kapit, and quite a few of Sarawak's unlicensed guides are competent and knowledgeable, it can be difficult to gauge a guide's suitability at first encounter. We advise that you talk to other travellers and local hotel owners as to which operators are recommended or best avoided.

VISITING LONGHOUSES ON YOUR OWN

A few communities around Kapit are accustomed to independent travellers, charging RM10 or RM15 for a day visit or RM50 per person if you overnight, including the preparation of food that you bring along. The headman may also expect a tip. Some people recommend bringing sweets or

school supplies for the children. There may not be much to do at a longhouse, especially if there aren't any English speakers around.

Longhouses you may consider visiting:

» **Rumah Bundong** One of the area's few remaining traditional Iban longhouses. Situated on Sungai Kapit a 45-minute (10km) drive from Kapit.

» **Rumah Jandok** A traditional longhouse on Sungai Yong with quite a few English speakers, situated down the Batang Rejang from Kapit.

» **Nanga Mujong** This Iban longhouse, site of a school and a clinic, is served by a road that ends on the opposite bank of the Batang Baleh, from where boats ferry residents across.

» **Rumah Penghulu Jampi** An Iban longhouse at the final express-boat stop on the Batang Baleh.

» **Rumah Lutut Tisa** This longhouse has an official homestay. To get there, take the road to Rumah Masam, whence it's another 1½ hours by boat.

We've heard reports that a local minibus cooperative is charging outrageous rates (RM180 one-way!) for land transport to nearby longhouses. A better bet might be to join the locals on one of the service-taxi minivans that hang out around Kapit Town Square (at the corner of Jln Teo Chow Beng and Jln Chua Leong Kee) and at Pasar Teresang (on Jln Teo Chow Beng).

To get to longhouses accessible only by river, head to **Jeti RC Kubu** (Jln Temenggong Koh), the jetty facing Fort Sylvia, and negotiate for a longboat. These can be expensive – imagine how much fuel the outboard slurps as the boat powers its way upstream.

★ ★ Festivals & Events

Baleh-Kapit Raft Safari

RAFT RACE

A challenging, two-day race recreating the experience of Iban and Orang Ulu people rafting downstream to bring their jungle produce to Kapit. Often held in April. For details, check with the Resident's Office in Kapit or Sibul's Visitors Information Centre.

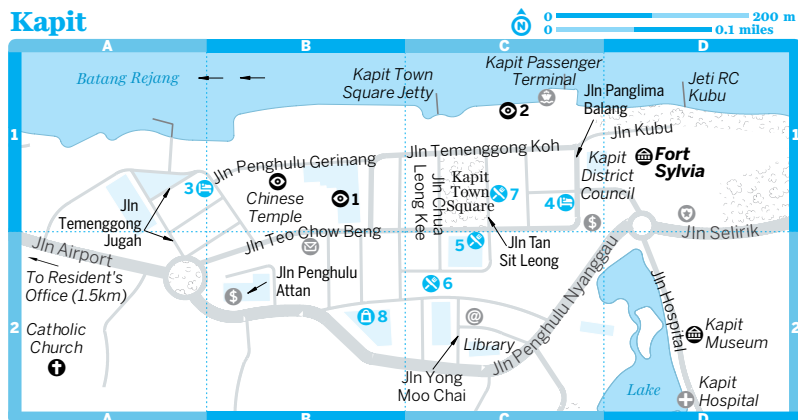
🛏 Sleeping

New Rejang Inn

HOTEL \$

(Map p424; ☎084-796600; 104 Jln Teo Chow Beng; d RM68; 📶) A welcoming and well-run hotel whose 15 immaculate, good-sized rooms come with comfortable mattresses, hot water, TV, phone and mini-fridge. The best-value accommodation in town.

Kapit



Kapit

Top Sights

Fort Sylvia D1

Sights

1 Pasar Teresang B1

2 Waterfront C1

Sleeping

3 Hiap Chiong Hotel A1

4 New Rejang Inn C1

Eating

5 Famous Bakery C2

Gelanggang Kenyalang (see 8)

6 Night Market C2

7 Soon Kit Café C1

Shopping

8 Sula Perengka Kapit B2

including breakfast yummies like laksa and *roti canai*.

Night Market

FOOD STALLS \$

(Map p424; Taman Selera Empurau; mains RM2.50-5; ☎5pm-11pm or midnight) An excellent place for satay or BBQ chicken. Situated a block up the slope from Kapit Town Square.

Famous Bakery

BAKERY \$

(Map p424; 22 Jln Teo Chow Beng; pastries RM1.340; ☎6am-6pm) Fresh Chinese and (approximately) Western-style pastries, cakes, mini-pizzas and other easy-to-pack day trip picnic fare.

Shopping

Sula Perengka Kapit

HANDICRAFTS

(Map p424; off Jln Penghulu Nyanggau; ☎8am-4pm Mon-Sat, 8am-noon Sun) A tiny, Iban-owned handicrafts place (Shop 21) upstairs at the Gelanggang Kenyalang food court.

Information

Kapit Hospital (☎084-796333; Jln Hospital; ☎24hr) Three ambulances and half-a-dozen doctors.

Getting There & Away

BOAT

Express boats to Sibul (RM20 to RM30, 2½ to three hours, once or twice an hour) depart between 6.40am and 3.15pm from the **Kapit Passenger Terminal** (Jln Panglima Balang; ☎), which has wi-fi that attracts whatever the river equivalent of road warriors is, and a nice verandah cafe with breezy river views.

Water levels permitting (for details, call Daniel Levoh in Belaga at 013-848 6351), an express boat heads upriver to Belaga (RM35, 4½ hours)

Hiap Chiong Hotel

HOTEL \$

(Map p424; ☎084-796314; 33 Jln Temenggong Jugah; d RM45-50; ☎) The 15 rooms have dingy-up, outdated furniture but are clean and have tiny flat-screen TVs.

Eating & Drinking

Soon Kit Café

CHINESE \$

(Map p424; 13 Jln Tan Sit Leong; mains RM2.70-6; ☎5.30am-5pm) An old-time *kopitiam* with laksa (RM4) in the morning and delicious chicken rice (RM5).

Gelanggang Kenyalang

FOOD COURT \$

(Map p424; off Jln Penghulu Nyanggau; mains from RM3.20; ☎6am-btwn 4pm & 7pm) A food court with Malay and Chinese favourites,

from the **Kapit Town Square jetty** (two blocks downriver from the Kapit Passenger Terminal) once a day at about 9.30am.

One express boat a day heads up the Batang Baleh, going as far as the Iban longhouse of Rumah Penghulu Jampi. It departs from Kapit at about 10am and from Rumah Penghulu Jampi at 12.30pm.

VAN

A small road network around Kapit, unconnected to the outside world, links the town to a number of longhouses. Vans that ply these byways congregate at Kapit Town Square.

BELAGA

POP 2500

By the time you pull into Belaga after the long cruise up the Batang Rejang, you may feel like you've arrived in the very heart of Borneo – in reality, you're only about 100km (as the crow flies) from the coast. There's not much to do here except soak up the frontier vibe, but nearby rivers are home to quite a few Kayan/Kenyah and Orang Ulu longhouses.

👁️ Sights

To get a feel for the pace of local life, wander among the two-storey shophouses of the compact, mostly Chinese **town centre**, or stroll through the manicured **park** – outfitted with basketball and tennis courts – between Main Bazaar and the river. Along the riverfront, a wooden bridge leads downstream to **Kampung Melayu Belaga**, Belaga's Malay quarter, whose wooden homes are built on stilts. Although there's 24-hour electricity (provided by a generator – Belaga is not yet connected to the Bakun Dam grid), pretty much everything closes by 7pm.

👤 Activities

LONGHOUSE VISITS

The main reason travellers visit Belaga is to venture up a jungle stream in search of hidden longhouses and secret waterfalls. Possible destinations include (listed alphabetically):

- » **Dong Daah** – a Kayan longhouse 10 minutes upriver by boat from Belaga
- » **Lirong Amo** – a Kayan longhouse about half-an-hour's walk from Belaga
- » **Long Liten** – a huge, old Kejaman longhouse a ways upriver
- » **Long Segaham** – a Kejaman longhouse situated upriver
- » **Sekapan Panjang** – a traditional, all-wood Sekapan longhouse half-an-hour downstream by boat from Belaga

» **Sihan** – a Penan settlement a two-hour walk from the other bank of the Batang Rejang

Before you can share shots of *tuak* with smiling locals, however, you need to find a guide. A good package should include a boat ride, jungle trekking, a waterfall swim, a night walk and activities such as cooking and fruit harvesting.

Daniel Levoh

TOUR

(☎013-848 6351, 086-461997; daniellevoh@hotmail.com; Jln Teh Ah Kiong) A Kayan former teacher and school headmaster, Daniel is friendly and knowledgeable. A daytrip costs RM150 to RM200 for two or three people, a three-day, two-night longhouse visit costs RM600 to RM750 for a group of three. Daniel can also arrange private transport around Belaga and Bintulu.

Hamdani

TOUR

(☎019-886 5770) For a group of four, Hamdani charges RM75 per person for a day trip and RM115 per person for an overnight stay.

Hasbi Awang

TOUR

(☎013-842 9767; freeland_blg@yahoo.com; 4 Main Bazaar, Belaga B&B) A day trip to two longhouses costs RM80 per person, an overnight trip is RM200 per person.

🌟 Events

Belaga Rainforest Challenge

TRIBAL EVENT

(☺Jul or Aug of even-numbered years) The three- or four-day event combines a 12km jungle run with boat races and traditional music and dance performances. Intended for area tribes but tourists are welcome.

🛏 Sleeping

Belaga's accommodation is of the cheap and shabby variety.

Daniel Levoh's Guesthouse

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎013-848 6351, 086-461997; daniellevoh@hotmail.com; Jln Teh Ah Kiong; dm RM15, d/tr RM30/35; ☺) The four simple rooms, each named after one of the owners' children, the chill-out balcony and the bathrooms are all on the 2nd floor. Owner Daniel Levoh, a retired teacher and one-time guide, is happy to share stories of Kayan longhouse life. Situated two blocks behind Main Bazaar.

Belaga Hotel

HOTEL \$

(☎086-461244; 14 Main Bazaar; d RM30-35; ☺) A convenient location makes up for the less-than-perfect standards at this veteran doss

house. The air-con – available in all but two of the 15 beat-up rooms – works, which is more than can be said for some of the plumbing.

Belaga B&B

HOTEL \$

(☎013-842 9767; Main Bazaar; r RM20-25; 🏠) Has seven very basic rooms, some with air-con, and shared bathroom facilities. Owned by Hasbi, a long-time longhouse guide.

Eating

Simple cafes serving Chinese and Malay dishes are sprinkled around the town centre, including Main Bazaar.

Kafeteria Mesra Murni

MALAY \$

(Jln Temenggong Matu; dishes RM3.50-6; ☎7am-7pm) This family-run Malay restaurant has the only riverfront dining in town. Almost adjacent Crystal Cafe, owned by an Iban-Kenyah family, is also good for a simple meal.

Information

The new BSM Bank branch has an ATM but it's often (or should we say usually) on the fritz. The medical clinic has one doctor. Several places to stay offer wi-fi.

Getting There & Away

When the express boat is running, it's possible to visit Belaga without backtracking, cruising the Batang Rejang in one direction and taking the logging road to/from Bintulu in the other.

BOAT

If the water levels at the Pelagus Rapids (32km upriver from Kapit) are high enough, you can take an express boat to Kapit (RM35, 4½ hours) departing at about 7.30am. To find out if the boat is running, call tour guide Daniel Levoh (p425). When the river is too low, the only way to get out of Belaga is by 4WD to Bintulu.

LAND

A bone-jarring (and, in the rain, fiendishly slippery) logging road connects Belaga with Bintulu (160km). Part of the way the route follows the 125km-long paved road to the Bakun Dam.

4WD Toyota Land Cruisers link Belaga with Bintulu (RM50 per person, RM400 for the whole vehicle, four hours) on most days, with departures from Belaga at about 7.30am and from Bintulu in the early afternoon (between noon and 2pm). In Belaga, vehicles to Bintulu congregate in front of Belaga B&B at about 7am. To arrange a vehicle from Bintulu, call Daniel Levoh (p425).

If you're coming from Miri or Batu Niah Junction or heading up that way (ie northeast), you can arrange to be picked up or dropped off at Simpang Bakun (Bakun Junction), which is on

the inland (old) highway 53km northeast of Bintulu and 159km southwest of Miri.

UPRIVER FROM BELAGA

About 40km upstream from Belaga, the Batang Rejang divides into several rivers, including the mighty Batang Balui, which wends and winds almost all the way up to the Kalimantan border. Just below this junction, the controversial Bakun Dam generates electricity and provides locals with a place to fish. Belaga-based guides can arrange visits to area longhouses.

One express boat a day links Belaga with Long Bangu (RM20, one hour), 2km downstream from the Bakun Dam. Departures are at about 3pm from Belaga and 6.15am from Rumah Apan.

Bintulu

POP 120,000

Thanks to huge offshore natural gas fields, Bintulu is Sarawak's most important centre for the production of LNG (liquefied natural gas) and fertiliser. The town, roughly midway between Sibu and Miri (about 200km from each), makes a good staging post for visits to Similajau National Park and for overland travel to Belaga.

Sights & Activities

Tua Pek Kong

TEMPLE

(Map p428; Main Bazaar; ☎dawn-dusk) This classic Chinese temple adds vibrant colours to the rather drab city centre. Follow the cock-a-doodle-does to the park around back, where young, impressively plumed **fighting cocks** (Map p428) – kept tethered to avoid strife – strut and crow.

Taman Tumbina

GARDENS, ZOO

(www.tumbina.com.my; Jln Tun Abdul Razak; adult RM2; ☎8am-5pm) This 57-hectare park includes an orchid garden, a butterfly house and lots of flamingos. The name is a contraction of the first syllables of two Malay words, *tumbuhan* (plant) and *binatang* (animal). Situated about 5km north of Bintulu Town (RM15 by taxi).

Festivals

Borneo International Kite Festival

KITES

(www.borneokite.com) An annual event, usually held over four or five days in September, that brings fanciful and extravagant kites from around the world to the old airport.

Sleeping

There are quite a few hotels, some on the dodgy side, on and near Jln Keppel, its

southern continuation, Jln Abang Galau, and parallel on Jln Masjid.

Kintown Inn

HOTEL \$

(Map p428; ☎086-333666; 93 Jln Keppel; s/d RM80/86; 🍷🍷) The 50 carpeted rooms are smallish but bright, with good views from the upper floors. Delivers the best value for your buck in town.

Riverfront Inn

HOTEL \$\$

(Map p428; ☎086-333111; riverfrontinn@hotmail.com; 256 Taman Sri Dagang; d with window RM104; 🍷🍷) A long-standing favourite with business and leisure visitors alike, the Riverfront is low-key but has a touch of class. Try to get a deluxe room (RM110) overlooking the river – the view is pure Borneo.



Eating & Drinking

Local nightlife, such as it is, consists mainly of single men hanging out along Jln Masjid.

Ban Kee Café

SEAFOOD \$\$

(Map p428; off Jln Abang Galau; mains RM6-15; ☎6am-midnight; 🍴) An indoor-outdoor Chinese seafood specialist with fresh fish (per kg RM40 to RM80) and seafood and, for breakfast, noodles and laksa (RM3.50).

Popular Corner Food Centre

HAWKER \$

(Map p428; 50 BDA Shahida Commercial Centre; mains RM3-8; ☎6am-10pm) Eight stalls sell laksa (morning only), rice porridge, dim sum and fresh Hong Kong-style seafood.

Night Market

FOOD STALLS \$

(Map p428; off Jln Abang Galau; mains RM2.50-5; ☎4-10pm or 11pm) A good place to snack track for fresh fruit and Malay favourites such as satay.

Pasar Utama

FOOD STALLS \$

(Map p428; New Market; Main Bazaar; mains RM3-5; ☎7am-5pm) Malay and Chinese food stalls fill the upper floor of this blue-coloured, figure-eight-shaped fruit and veggie market.

Chef

BAKERY \$

(Map p428; 92 Jln Abang Galau; cakes from RM1; ☎8.30am-9pm) Makes Chinese-inflected halal baked goods, including buns with hot dogs baked inside (RM1.70) and surprisingly tasty Belgian chocolate cake (RM6.80). Ideal fare for a picnic lunch.



Information

Fi Wee Internet Centre (1st fl, 133 Jln Masjid; per hr RM2; ☎9am-midnight) Has 27 internet computers at the top of a filthy staircase.



Getting There & Away

To arrange transport by 4WD Toyota Land Cruiser from Bintulu to Belaga (per person RM50, four hours) on some pretty rough logging roads, call Daniel Levoh (p425). Departures are generally in the early afternoon (between noon and 2pm).

Air

AirAsia (www.airasia.com) and **Malaysia Airlines** (www.malaysiaairlines.com) have direct flights to Kuching and Kuala Lumpur (KL). **MASwings** (www.maswings.com.my) can whisk you to Kota Kinabalu (KK), Miri, Sibul and Kuching.

Bus

The long-distance bus station is at Medan Jaya, 5km northeast of the centre (aka Bintulu Town); a taxi costs RM15. About a dozen companies have buses approximately hourly:

Kuching (RM60 to RM65, 10 hours) Via Sibul (RM20 to RM25, four hours), from 6.45am to midnight.

Miri (RM20 to RM25, four hours) Via Niah Junction (RM12 to RM15, 2-3/4 hours), from 6am to 11.15pm.



Getting Around

To/From the Airport

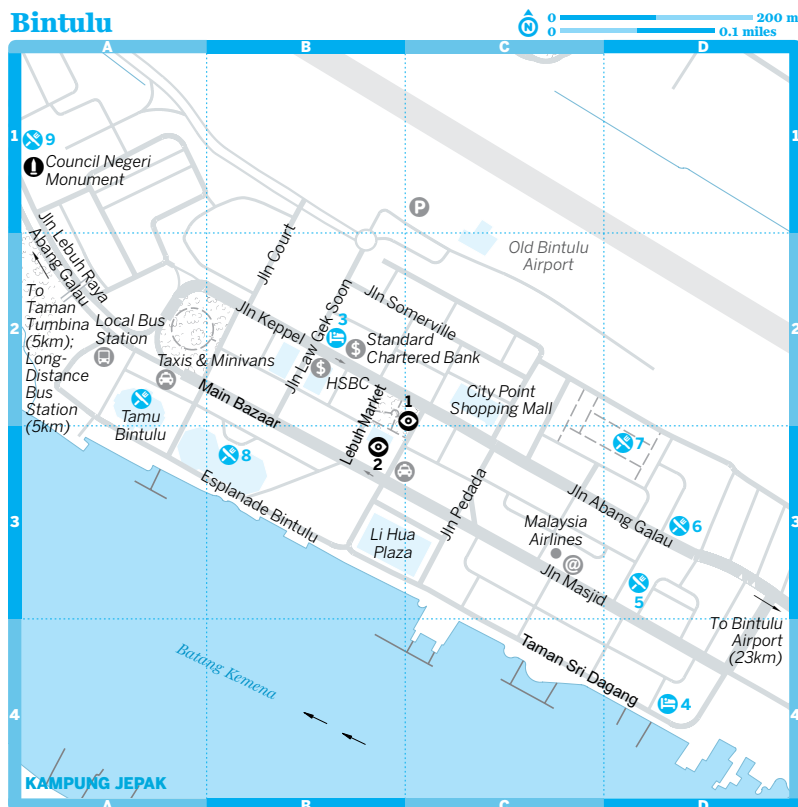
There is no public transport to/from the airport, which is 23km from the centre by road. A taxi costs RM35.

Similajau National Park

An easy 30km northeast of Bintulu, **Similajau National Park** (📍by satellite phone 086-489003, office in Bintulu 086-313726; www.sarawakforestry.com; admission RM20; 🕒park office 8am-1pm & 2-5pm Sat-Thu, 8-11.45am & 2.15-5pm Fri) is a fine little coastal park with golden-sand beaches, good walking trails and simple accommodation. Occupying a narrow, 30km-long strip along the South China Sea, its 90 sq km encompasses littoral habitats such as mangroves, *kerangas* (heath forest) and mixed dipterocarp forest, (classic lowland tropical rainforest). Four species of dolphin, including Irrawaddy, can sometimes be spotted out at sea, and green turtles occasionally trundle ashore to lay their eggs along Turtle Beach II and Golden Beach.

Bintuluans flock to Similajau (especially the beaches) on weekends and public holidays, but the park is gloriously deserted on weekdays.

Bintulu



Bintulu

📍 Sights

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🍴 Eating

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DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Similajau's waterways are prime crocodile habitat so do not swim or wade in the rivers or near river mouths, and be careful when

walking near riverbanks, especially early or late in the day.

Because of dangerous undertows, swimming is forbidden at the two Turtle Beaches and at Golden Beach.

👁️ Sights & Activities

The casuarina-lined beach at park HQ, strewn with driftwood but clean, is a great place to chill out and swim – but watch out for jellyfish (if you get stung, rangers can provide vinegar to alleviate the pain).

Similajau's gently undulating **Main Trail** (Coastal Trail) parallels the coast, starting across Sungai Likau from park HQ and ending at **Golden Beach** (10km, four hours one-way). En route it passes by rocky headlands, small bays, **Turtle Beach I** (6km, three hours) and Turtle Beach II (7.5km, 3½ hours). For a view back along the coast towards Bintulu and its natural gas installations, head to the **View Point** (1.3km from HQ, 40 minutes).

Right after you cross the suspension bridge next to park HQ, a plankwalk to your right follows the river upstream. Both the 600m **Education Trail** and its continuation, the 1.7km **Circular Trail** (which takes you back to a point near the bridge), pass through brilliant estuarine mangroves and mixed dipterocarp forest.

Similajau's trails are easy to follow and are clearly marked (in the case of the Main Trail, in red) so a guide isn't necessary, though it's possible to hire one for RM30 per hour (RM40 per hour for a **night walk**). A simple but useful trail map is available at park HQ. Bring plenty of drinking water.

HQ staff are happy to arrange travel in a national park-owned boat with space for up to five passengers. Sea conditions sometimes get rough after about noon. Among your cruising options:

Night River Cruise (RM150; ☎7-9pm) A great way to see crocs. Reserve during office hours.

Batu Mandi Tide Pools (RM150) The tidal pools around this low, rocky island can only be visited at low tide and when the sea is calm.

Turtle Beaches I and II (one-way/return RM180/230) Take the boat out there (it's a half-hour ride) and you can walk back.

Golden Beach (one-way/return RM220/280) Another option for a one-way walk.

Sleeping

Similajau's rustic overnight options, just 100m from the beach, are booked out months ahead on public holidays and sometimes fill up on weekends. To reserve, contact the park by phone, fax (086-489 002) or email (norhider@sarawakforestry.com). Bookings *cannot* be made through the national park offices in Kuching or Miri.

Renting a towel costs RM6.

Chalets

CHALET \$\$

(1/2 rooms RM106/159) Each of the six new chalets has two rooms, each of which has one queen bed, one twin bed and one fan.

Rest House

CHALET \$\$

(per night RM318; ☎) Sleeps four in air-con comfort.

Hostel

HOSTEL \$

(per room RM42) Each room has four beds (bunks in the case of Hostel 3) and a wall fan. Hostels 1 and 2, built in 2011, have

attached bathrooms. Dorm beds are not available individually.

Campground

CAMPGROUND \$

(per person RM5) Camping is only permitted next to park HQ. Showers are provided.



Eating

The park's **cafeteria** (Canteen; mains RM5-13; ☎7.30am-9pm; ☎) serves noodle and rice dishes and can prepare packed lunches. Cooking is not allowed in the chalets or the hostel but there are designated sites for barbecuing. To prepare packaged noodles, you can borrow an electric kettle at the park office.



Getting There & Away

The HQ of Similajau National Park is about 30km northeast of Bintulu, 9km off the coastal road to Miri. Count on paying RM50 one-way to hire a **taxi** (☎086-332009) – or a 10-seat minibus – from Bintulu's Pasar Utama (Main Bazaar) (p427); from the airport, the cab ride costs about RM75.

To get back to Bintulu, you can pre-arrange a pick-up time or ask HQ staff to help you call for a taxi.

Niah National Park

The vast limestone caverns of 31-sq-km **Niah National Park** (☎085-737450, 085-737454; www.sarawakforestry.com; admission RM20; ☎park office 8am-5pm) are among Borneo's most famous and impressive natural attractions. At the heart of the park is the Great Cave, one of the largest caverns in the world.

Niah's caves have provided groundbreaking insights into human life on Borneo way back when the island was still connected to mainland Southeast Asia. In 1958 archaeologists led by Tom Harrisson discovered the 40,000-year-old skull of an anatomically modern human, the oldest remains of a *Homo sapiens* discovered anywhere in Southeast Asia.

Rock paintings and several small canoe-like coffins ('death ships') indicate that the site was used as a burial ground much more recently. Some of the artefacts found at Niah are on display at the Sarawak Museum in Kuching; others (a handful) are in the park's own museum.

Niah's caves accommodate a staggering number of bats and are an important nesting site for swiftlets, some of whose species supply the vital ingredient for bird's-nest

soup. Traditionally, the Penan are custodians and collectors of the nests, while the Iban have the rights to the caves' other commodity, bat and bird guano, which is highly valued as fertiliser (no prizes for guessing who got first pick). During the harvesting season (August to March), nest collectors can be seen on towering bamboo structures wedged against the cave roof.

We've heard travellers say that if you've been (or will be going) to Gunung Mulu National Park, going to Niah might not be worth the effort – unless you're fascinated by human prehistory, of course.

Sights & Activities

Niah Archaeology Museum

MUSEUM

(motor launch per person 7.30am-5.30pm RM1, 5.30-7.30pm RM1.50, after 7.30pm RM3 by pre-arrangement; ☀9am-4.30pm, closed Mon) Across the river from park HQ, this museum has rather old-fashioned displays on Niah's geology, ecology and prehistoric archaeology, including an original burial canoe that's at least 1200 years old, a reproduction of the Painted Cave, a case featuring swiftlets' nests, and a replica of the 40,000-year-old 'Deep Skull'.

To get to the museum from HQ, cross the Sungai Niah by motor launch.

If you don't have your own, torches/flashlights (RM5; make sure the one you get is working) – extremely useful if you want to go any distance into the caves – can be rented at the ferry terminal and the museum.

Great Cave & Painted Cave

CAVE

From the museum, a raised boardwalk leads 3.1km (3¼ to four hours return) through swampy, old-growth rainforest to the mouth of the Great Cave, a vast cavern approximately 2km long, up to 250m across and up to 60m high. To make it back by nightfall, start your stroll by about 2pm.

As you walk, stop and stand silently every once in a while – you'll hear lots of birds and, if you're lucky, may hear or even see macaques, especially early in the morning or in the evening.

Just before the cave entrance, the boardwalk forks. The right fork leads to the cave, while the left fork goes to Rumah Patrick Libau, an Iban longhouse hamlet. Villagers usually sit at the junction selling cold drinks and souvenirs.

Inside the Great Cave, the trail splits to go around a massive central pillar, but both branches finish at the same point so

it's impossible to get lost if you stick to the boardwalk. The stairs and handrails are usually covered with dirt or guano, and can get very slippery in places. The rock formations are spectacular and ominous by turns, and as you slip in and out of the gloom you may find yourself thinking of Jules Verne's *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*. When the sun hits certain overhead vents, the cave is penetrated by dramatic rays of other-worldly light. When you're halfway through the dark passage known as **Gan Kira** (Moon Cave), try turning off your flashlight to enjoy the experience of pure, soupy blackness.

The **Painted Cave** is famed for its ancient drawings, in red hematite, depicting jungle animals, human figures and the souls of the dead being taken to the afterlife by boat. At research time it was closed for maintenance until further notice.

Bats & Swiftlets

FLYING CREATURES

At one time, some 470,000 bats and four million swiftlets called Niah home. There are no current figures, but the walls of the caves are no longer thick with bats and there are fewer bird's nests to harvest.

Several species of swiftlet nest on the cave walls. The most common by far is the glossy swiftlet, whose nest is made of vegetation and is therefore of no use in making soup. For obvious reasons, the species whose nests are edible (ie made of delicious salivary excretions) are far less abundant and can only be seen in the remotest corners of the cavern. Several types of bat also roost in the cave, but not in dense colonies, as at Gunung Mulu National Park.

The best time to see the cave's winged wildlife is at dusk (5.30pm to 6.45pm) during the 'changeover', when the swiftlets stream back to their nests and the bats come swirling out for the night's feeding. If you decide to stick around, let staff at the park HQ's Registration Counter know and make sure you either get back to the ferry by 7.30pm or coordinate a later pick-up time with the boatman.

Bukit Kasut

TRAIL

This 45-minute trail, part of it a boardwalk through freshwater swamp forest, goes from near the museum southward up to the summit of Bukit Kasut (205m). In the wet season, it can get muddy and treacherously slippery.

Sleeping & Eating

Park HQ has a decent **canteen** (Cafeteria; mains RM5-10; ☺8am-10pm; 🍴). Cooking is prohibited in park accommodation but, except at the hostel, you can boil water to make instant noodles.

Batu Niah town, 4km from park HQ (3km if you walk), has a couple of basic hotels.

Niah National Park

Bookings for park-run accommodation can be made at park HQ (in person or by phone) or through one of the **National Park Booking Offices** (📞in Kuching 082-248088, in Miri 085-434184) – but *not* through Sarawak Forestry's website. Lodges and rooms often fill up on Chinese, Malay and public holidays.

Forest Lodges

CHALET \$\$

(1/2 rooms with fan RM106/159, with air-con RM159/239) The park has six rustic two-room chalets with attached bath; each room can sleep up to four.

Hostel

HOSTEL \$

(r RM42) Each basic hostel room has space for up to four people.

Homestay

HOMESTAY \$

(📞019-805 2415; per person incl dinner & breakfast RM70) The Iban longhouse village of Rumah Patrick Libau, near the Great Cave, has an informal homestay program.

Campground

CAMPGROUND \$

(per person RM5) Camping is permitted near park HQ.

Batu Niah Junction

If your bus arrives late or is leaving early, you might consider overnighting at Batu Niah Junction, a major transport hub 15km south of park HQ.

Hangarlike **Batu Niah Food Court**

Centre (☺24hr) has lots of Chinese and Malay food stalls and, in the little grocery to the left as you enter the hall, **internet access** (per hour RM3; ☺24hr). Bathrooms are way in back, beyond the terrariums holding reptiles believed to bring good luck – people leave cash offerings for the ancient river turtle, on loan from a Chinese temple, and the albino snake. There are more food stalls and a fruit and veggie market across the highway.

TTL Motel

HOTEL \$\$

(📞086-738377; d from RM80-118; ☺reception 24hr; 🍴) This newish, 39-room low-rise complex is pricey for what you get, which is mostly convenience. All rooms have win-

dows but some of the more expensive ones are a bit musty. To get there from Batu Niah Food Court Centre, go out the back door and hang a diagonal left.

Getting There & Away

Niah National Park is about 115km southwest of Miri and 122km northeast of Bintulu. If you're pressed for time, it can be visited as a day trip from either city.

Park HQ is 15km north of Batu Niah Junction, a major transport hub on the inland (old) Miri–Bintulu highway. This makes getting to the park by public transport a wee bit tricky (but it's much harder to get to from the new coastal highway).

All long-haul buses linking Miri's Pujut Bus Terminal with Bintulu, Sibu and Kuching stop at Batu Niah Junction, but the only way to get from the junction to the park is to hire an unofficial taxi. The price should be RM30 (RM40 for a group of four) but you'll have to nose around the junction to find one. A good place to check: the bench in front of Shen Yang Trading, at the corner of Ngu's Garden Food Court. National park staff (or, after hours, park security personnel) can help arrange a car back to the junction.

From Batu Niah Junction, buses head to Miri (RM10 to RM12) from about 8am to 1am and to Bintulu (RM15, two hours) from about 8am to 10.30pm. Other well-served destinations include Sibu (RM30 to RM40, five to six hours) and Kuching (RM70 to RM80, 12 hours). Kiosks representing various companies can be found at both ends of the building directly across the highway from the Batu Niah Food Court Centre.

From Miri, a taxi to Niah costs RM150 one-way or RM300 return, including three hours of wait time.

Lambir Hills National Park

The 69-sq-km **Lambir Hills National Park** (📞085-471609; www.sarawakforestry.com; admission RM10; ☺park office 8am-5pm) shelters dozens of jungle waterfalls, plenty of cool pools where you can take a dip, and a bunch of great walking trails through mixed dipterocarp and *kerangas* forests. A perennial favourite among locals and an important centre of scientific research, Lambir Hills makes a great day or overnight trip out of the city.

The park encompasses a range of low sandstone hills with an extraordinary range of plants and animals – perhaps even, as noted in Sarawak Forestry's publications, 'the greatest level of plant biodiversity on

the planet'. Studies of a 52-hectare research plot (closed to visitors) have found an amazing 1200 tree species! Fauna include clouded leopards, barking deer, pangolins, tarsiers, five varieties of civet, 10 bat species and 50 other kinds of mammals, though you are unlikely to see many of them around park HQ. Lambir Hills is also home to an unbelievable 237 species of bird, among them eight kinds of hornbill, and 24 species of frog – and more are being found all the time.



Activities

Lambir Hills' colour-coded trails branch off four primary routes and lead to 14 destinations – rangers, based in an ugly new HQ building opened in 2012, can supply you with a map and are happy to make suggestions. Make sure you get back to park HQ before 5pm – unless you're heading out for a night walk, that is, in which case you need to coordinate with park staff. Hiring a guide (optional) costs RM20 per hour for up to five people.

From HQ, the **Main Trail** follows a small river, Sungai Liam, past two attractive waterfalls to the 25m-high **Latak Waterfall** (1km, 15 minutes to 20 minutes one-way), which has a picnic area, changing rooms and a refreshing, sandy pool suitable for swimming. It can get pretty crowded on weekends and holidays.

You're likely to enjoy more natural tranquility along the path to **Tengkorong Waterfall**, a somewhat strenuous 6km walk (one-way) from park HQ.

Another trail, steep in places, goes to the summit of **Bukit Lambir** (465m; 7km one-way from HQ), which affords fine views. Keep an eye out for changes in the vegetation, including wild orchids, as the elevation rises.



Sleeping & Eating

The park has 13 reasonably comfortable, two-room **chalets** (1/2 rooms with fan RM50/75, with air-con RM100/150); the old ones are wooden, the four new ones are made of concrete. Fan rooms have two beds, while air-con rooms have three. If you get in before 2pm (check-in time), bags can be left at the camp office. **Camping** (per person RM5) is permitted near the park HQ. Individual dorm beds are not available.

Book by calling the park or through Miri's National Park Booking Office; on-line booking is not yet possible. Chalets are sometimes booked out on weekends and during school holidays.

A small **canteen** (Cafeteria; mains RM4-6; ☺8am or 8.30am-5pm or later) serves fried rice and noodles. Cooking facilities are not available but you can rent an electric kettle (RM5) to boil water for instant noodles.



Getting There & Away

Park HQ is 32km south of Miri on the inland (old) highway to Bintulu. All the buses that link Miri's Pujut Bus Terminal with Bintulu, Sibul and Kuching pass by here (RM10 from Miri) – just ask the driver to stop. Local buses from Miri to 'Lambir' go to the village of Lambir on the coast, not to the park.

A taxi from Miri costs RM60 one-way (RM120 return, including two hours of wait time).

Miri

POP 295,000

The dynamic oil town of Miri is busy and modern – not much about it is Borneo – but there's plenty of money sloshing around so the eating is good, the broad avenues are brightly lit and there's plenty to do when it's raining. The city's friendly guesthouses are a good place to meet other travellers. The population is about 40% Dayak (mainly Iban), 30% Chinese and 18% Malay.

Miri serves as a major transport hub, so if you're travelling to/from Brunei, Sabah, the Kelabit Highlands or the national parks of Gunung Mulu, Niah or Lambir Hills, chances are you'll pass this way.



Sights

Miri is not big on historical sites – it was pretty much destroyed during WWII – but it's not an unattractive city. A walk around the centre is a good way to get a feel for the local vibe – streets worth a wander include (from north to south) Jln North Yu Seng, Jln South Yu Seng, Jln Maju and Jln High Street.

Miri City Fan

PARK

(Jln Kipas; ☺24hr) Decked out in coloured lights at night, this 10.4-hectare park's Chinese- and Malay-style gardens and ponds are great for a stroll. Also boasts a beautiful, new library, an indoor stadium and an Olympic-sized swimming pool (RM1).

Canada Hill

HILL, MUSEUM

(Bukit Kanada, Bukit Tenaga) The low ridge 2km southeast of the town centre was the site of Malaysia's first oil well, the **Grand Old Lady**, drilled in 1910. Appropriately, the old

derrick stands right outside the **Petroleum Museum** (Jln Canada Hill; ☎9am-4.30pm, closed Fri), whose interactive exhibits, some designed for kids, are a good, pro-Big Oil introduction to the hugely lucrative industry that has so enriched Miri (and Malaysia's federal government).

The hill itself is a popular exercise spot, and it's worth driving up here at sunset (it's a bit far to walk) for the views across town to the South China Sea.

Saberkas Weekend Market

MARKET

(☎3pm Fri-evening Saturday, daily during Ramadan) One of the most colourful and friendly markets in Sarawak. Vendors are more than happy to answer questions about their colourful products, which include tropical fruits and veggies, BBQ chicken, satay, grilled stingray and handicrafts. Situated about 3km northeast of the centre near the Boulevard Commercial Centre, Miri's newest shopping mall. Served by buses 1, 1A, 31, 42, 62, 63, 66 and 68.

San Ching Tian Temple

TEMPLE

(Jln Krokop 9) Said to be the largest Taoist temple in Southeast Asia. Built in 2000, the design features intricate dragon reliefs brought over from China. A huge new Chinese temple is being built right nearby. Situated about 1km northwest of the Saberkas Weekend Market. Served by bus 44.



Activities

Sandflies can be a pesky problem at Miri-area beaches.

Scuba Diving

SCUBA DIVING

Although the waters off Miri are better known for drilling than diving, the area – much of it part of the **Miri-Sibuti Coral Reef Marine Park** (www.fri.gov.my/friswak/epro_coral.htm) – has some excellent 7m- to 30m-deep scuba sites, including old oil platforms teeming with fish and assorted trawler and freighter wrecks. Water visibility is at its best from March to September.

Red Monkey Divers (☎014-699 8296; www.redmonkeydivers.com; Jln Dato Abang Indeh, Gymkhana Club; ☎10am-5pm Mon-Sat, closed Dec-Feb), based about 2km south of the Mega Hotel, is a professional outfit that offers PADI and BSAC diving courses.

Hash House Harriers

RUNNING

(www.mirihh.com) Visitors are welcome to join friendly locals and expats for runs, which begin at 5.15pm every Tuesday and at

4.30pm on the first Saturday of the month. For details, ask the owners of the Ming Café (p436), who are enthusiastic hashers.

Megalanes East Bowling Alley

BOWLING

(Map p434; 3rd fl, Bintang Plaza, Jln Miri Pujut; per game RM3.80-5.90, shoes RM2; ☎10am-midnight) The 24 lanes are a great escape on a rainy day.



Tours

Miri-based companies offering trekking in northeastern Sarawak include:

Borneo Jungle Safari

TREKKING

(☎085-422595; www.borneojunglesafari.com; Lot 1396, 1st fl, Centre Point Commercial Centre II, Jln Kubu) Runs the Ba Kelalan Apple Lodge Homestay up in Ba Kelalan.

Borneo Tropical Adventure

TREKKING

(Map p434; ☎085-419337; www.borneotropicaladventures.com; Lot 906, Shop 12, ground fl, Soon Hup Tower, Jln Merbau) Runs the Benarat Inn at Gunung Mulu National Park.



Festivals

Borneo Jazz Festival

JAZZ

(www.jazzborneo.com; Jln Temenggong Datuk Oyong Lawai; ☎weekend in mid-May) Features an eclectic assemblage of international talent. Formerly known as the Miri International Jazz Festival.



Sleeping

Miri has some of Sarawak's best backpackers' guesthouses.

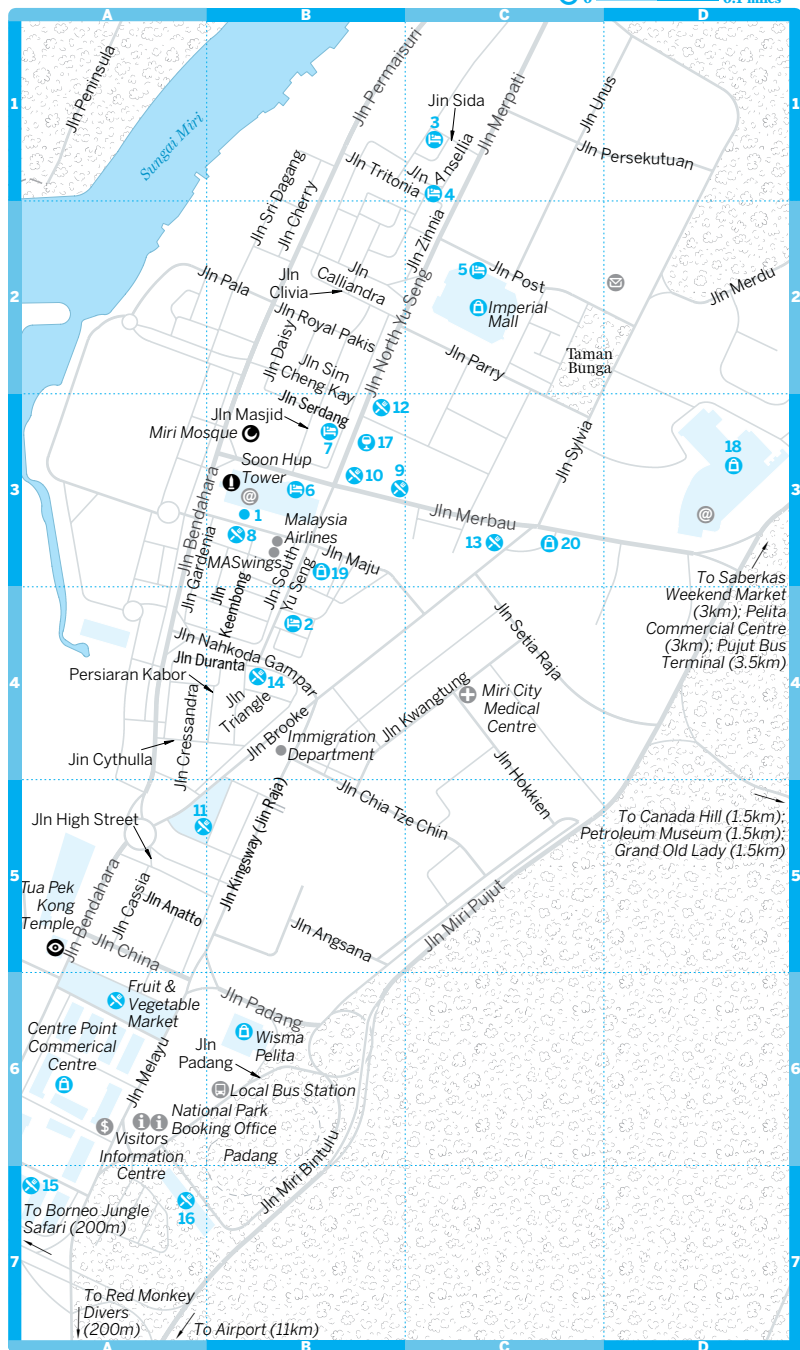
If you're on a tight budget, choose your bed carefully – at the cheapie dives catering to oil-rig roustabouts (eg on and east of Jln South Yu Seng), many of the dreary rooms are windowless and musty, and Miri's brothel business booms at some of the shadier bottom-end digs.



Dillenia Guesthouse

GUESTHOUSE \$\$

(Map p434; ☎085-434204; <https://sites.google.com/site/dilleniaguesthouse>; 1st fl, 846 Jln Sida; dm/s/d/q incl breakfast RM30/50/80/110; ☎☎☎) This super-welcoming guesthouse, with 11 rooms and lots of nice little touches (eg plants in the bathrooms), lives up to its motto, 'a home away from home'. Incredibly helpful Mrs Lee is an artesian well of useful travel information and tips – and leech socks. All rooms have shared bathrooms. Served by local bus 42.



Miri

Activities, Courses & Tours

- 1 Borneo Tropical Adventure B3
Megalanes East Bowling Alley (see 18)

Sleeping

- 2 Apollo Hotel B4
3 Dillenia Guesthouse C1
4 Highlands Backpackers C1
5 Imperial Hotel C2
6 Mega Hotel B3
7 Minda Guesthouse B3

Eating

- 8 Khan's Restaurant Islamic B3
9 Meng Chai Seafood B3
10 Ming Café B3

- 11 Miri Central Market A5
12 Muara Restoran B3
13 Rainforest Cafe C3
14 Sin Liang Supermarket B4
15 Summit Cafe A7
16 Tamu Muhibbah A7

Drinking

- 17 Barcelona B3

Shopping

- 18 Bintang Plaza D3
19 Borneo Arts B3
20 Miri Handicraft Centre C3
Popular Book Store (see 18)

Minda Guesthouse

GUESTHOUSE \$

(Map p434; ☎085-411422; www.mindaguesthouse.com; 1st & 2nd fl, Lot 637, Jln North Yu Seng; dm per person incl breakfast RM20, d RM50-60; ㊟㊟㊟) In the heart of Miri's dining and drinking district, this comfy establishment offers 13 clean rooms with colourful bedclothes, a small kitchen, a DVD lounge, unlimited tea and coffee and a great rooftop sundeck. Dorm rooms are pretty packed, with eight or 12 beds. Two rooms come with private bath. Light sleepers be warned: the nightclub across the street pumps out music until 2am.

Highlands Backpackers

GUESTHOUSE \$

(Map p434; ☎085-422327; www.highlandsmiri.com; 2nd fl, Lot 839, Jln Merpati; dm/d RM22/50; ㊟㊟㊟) Miri's original guesthouse, in new digs since mid-2012, offers 15 rooms (52 beds), two-thirds of them with windows; a lounge with satellite TV; and inexpensive laundry (RM8 per load, including drying). The dorm rooms have six to 14 beds. The affable owner, a Twin Otter pilot from New Zealand everyone calls Captain David, sometimes drops by. Served by local bus 42.

Imperial Hotel

HOTEL \$\$

(Map p434; ☎085-431133; www.imperialhotel.com.my; Jln Post; d from RM200; ㊟㊟㊟) The city centre's poshest hotel boasts 23 floors, 266 rooms, business and fitness centres, a sauna and a swimming pool.

Mega Hotel

HOTEL \$\$

(Map p434; ☎085-432432; www.megahotel.com.my; 907 Jln Merbau; r from RM195; ㊟㊟㊟) Don't judge a hotel by its tasteless exterior or tacky lobby – the 288 rooms here, spread over 16

storeys, are comfortable and very spacious, if a bit old-fashioned. Amenities include a fitness centre (7th floor) and a 30m pool with town views and a jacuzzi (4th floor).

Apollo Hotel

HOTEL \$

(Map p434; ☎085-433077; fax 085-419 964; 4 Jln South Yu Seng; s/d/tr from RM65/75/85; ㊟) An old-fashioned but well-maintained Chinese cheapie. Very central. The 18 rooms are simple and spotless. Reception is around behind the Apollo Seafood Centre.

Miri Trail Guesthouse

AIRPORT HOTEL \$

(☎012-8040806, 017-850 3666; www.miritrailguesthouse.com; Airport Commercial Centre, Jln Airport; dm/d incl breakfast RM25/55, day use RM15/30; ㊟㊟㊟) A basic crash pad with six rooms, most without windows. Bathrooms are shared. Situated across the road from the airport (above the MASwings office), so if you're transiting through Miri you can rest here overnight or during the day.



Eating



Summit Cafe

DAYAK \$

(Map p434; Centre Point Commercial Centre, Jln Melayu; mains from RM3; ☎6am-early afternoon Mon-Sat) If you've never tried Kelabit cuisine, this place will open up whole new worlds for your tastebuds. Try the colourful array of 'jungle food' – *canko manis* (forest ferns), *dure'* (fried jungle leaf), minced tapioca leaves, and (sometimes) wild boar. The best selection is available before 11.30am – once the food runs out they close! Gets rave reviews.

Meng Chai Seafood

SEAFOOD \$\$

(Map p434; 11a Jln Merbau; fish per kg RM25-80; ☎4.30pm-midnight) Discerning locals crowd this first-rate eatery, housed in two and very unassuming adjacent buildings. Specialities include barbecued garlic fish, *kampung*-raised chicken and *midin* fern. Seawater tanks hold live clams and prawns. Does not serve pork.

Rainforest Cafe

CHINESE \$\$

(Map p434; 49 Jln Brooke; mains from RM10; ☎10am-2pm & 5-11.30pm) Often packed with local families, this breezy, open-air eatery specialises in Chinese-style dishes such as 'braised rainforest bean curd', 'crispy roasted chicken' and 'pork leg Philippine style'.

Muara Restoran

INDONESIAN \$\$

(Map p434; Jln North Yu Seng; mains RM7-15; ☎11am-4am) Expat Indonesian oil workers in bright yellow overalls flock to this tin-roofed shed for *lalapan* (tofu, tempeh, meat, spinach-like greens, raw cucumber and rice, eaten with spicy *sambal belacan*). Great for a late-late meal.

Ming Café

ASIAN, WESTERN \$\$

(Map p434; www.mingcafe.com.my; cnr Jln North Yu Seng & Jln Merbau; mains RM5-25; ☎10am-2am) Take your pick of Chinese, Malay, buffet-style Indian (from RM5) and Western food at this ever-busy corner eatery. Fresh fruit juice and shakes cost RM6 to RM8.50. The bar stocks two dozen bottled beers and has six beers on tap, including Guinness. Happy hangout of the Hash House Harriers.

Khan's Restaurant Islamic

INDIAN \$

(Map p434; 229 Jln Maju; mains RM4-8; ☎6.30am-8.30pm; 🍴) This simple canteen is one of Miri's best North Indian eateries, whipping up tasty treats like mouth-watering chicken

vindaloo (RM12) and seven veggie mains (RM4).

Miri Central Market

HAWKER \$

(Map p434; Jln Brooke, Pasar Pusat Miri; mains RM2.50-4; ☎7am-midnight) Especially popular Chinese food purveyors here include Stall 5, which serves up chicken curry rice in the morning, and Stall 6, known for its chicken porridge (available in the evening).

Tamu Muhibbah

MARKET

(Map p434; Jln Padang; ☎2am-6pm or 7pm) Fruits and veggies, some straight from the jungle, are sold at stalls owned by Chinese, Malay, Iban and Orang Ulu.

Sin Liang Supermarket

SUPERMARKET \$

(Map p434; Jln Duranta; ☎8.30am-9pm) Well stocked with munchies, toiletries and Aussie wines.

**Drinking****Barcelona**

BAR

(Map p434; Jln North Yu Seng; draught beer RM8-12; ☎4pm-2am, happy hour 4-9pm) More equatorial than Iberian, this place has a relaxed, upscale vibe and a big screen for footy. Seating is open-air at wooden tables. Liquid specialities range from Spanish and Australian wines to mojitos (RM15) and sex on the beach (RM20), not something you often find in Malaysia. Serves tapas and some Western dishes. The bar next door, World-Club Station, hosts a rockin' Filipino band from 10pm to 2am daily except Monday.

Pelita Commercial Centre

BAR DISTRICT

(cnr Jln Miri Pujut & Jln Sehati) If you're keen on a pub crawl, consider catching a cab to this warren of small streets lined with pubs, cafes, restaurants and dodgy karaoke places

ECO-LODGE

Looking for great place to hang out and be mellow, surrounded by tropical fruit trees?

TreeTops Lodge (☎085-472172; www.treetops-borneo.com; Kampung Siwa Jaya; d/q incl breakfast RM120/180, with fan & shared bathroom RM80; 🍴🍷), run by Mike (a retired British pilot) and his Sarawakian wife Esther, has eight, beautifully maintained rooms – four of them quite basic – set in a lovely, calming garden. When you're not lounging on the beach (2km away), you can fish for tilapia in the pond or go hiking. A light lunch costs RM7, and dinner is RM22.

TreeTops is 15km southwest of Miri along the coastal (new) road to Bintulu. From Miri's local bus terminal, take bus 13 (RM4, every 1½ to two hours from 5.50am to 6.30pm) to the end of the line, whence it's a 2km walk. From the airport, a blue taxi costs about RM75. TreeTops is not far from the western reaches of Lambir Hills National Park but getting to park HQ involves a 40km drive (transport available).

3km north of the centre. Don't mess with the local toughs.



Shopping

Miri Handicraft Centre

HANDICRAFTS

(Map p434; cnr Jln Brooke & Jln Merbau; ☎8am-5.30pm) Thirteen stalls, rented from the city, sell colourful bags, baskets, sarongs, textiles etc made by Iban, Kelabit, Kenyah/Kayan, Lun Bawang, Chinese and Malay artisans. Stall No 7 has some fine Kelabit beadwork from Bario.

Borneo Arts

HANDICRAFTS

(Map p434; Jln South Yu Seng; ☎9am-9pm) Dayak handicrafts and souvenirs.

Popular Book Store

BOOKS

(Map p434; 2nd fl, Bintang Plaza, Jln Miri Pujut; ☎10am-10pm) A mega-bookshop with a huge selection of English books, and Lonely Planet titles in English and Chinese.

Bintang Plaza

SHOPPING CENTRE

(Map p434; Jln Miri Pujut; ☎10am-10pm) A modern, multi-storey, air-con mall that could *almost* be in Singapore. The 3rd floor is full of shops specialising in computers and cameras.



Information

For local low-down, some great tips and an outline of local history, see Miri's unofficial website, www.miriresortcity.com.

ATMs can be found at the airport and are sprinkled all over the city centre.

It's a good idea to stock up on medicines and first-aid supplies before heading inland to Gunung Mulu National Park or the Kelabit Highlands.

Internet Access

Internet Shop (1st fl, Shop 1-04, Soon Hup Tower, cnr Jln Bendahara & Jln Merbau; per hr RM2; ☎8am-8pm) Popular with zombified teenage gamers.

IT Cyber Station (3rd fl, western end, Bintang Plaza, Jln Miri Pujut; per hr RM2.50; ☎10am-10pm) Has 72 computers.

Laundry

If you drop off your clothes at **EcoLaundry** (☎016-878 9908, 085-414266; 638 Jln North Yu Seng; per kg RM5; ☎7am-7pm Mon-Sat, to 5pm Sun) before flying up to Gunung Mulu National Park or the Kelabit Highlands, you'll save luggage weight and have clean undies when you return! Offers free pickup at guesthouses and hotels.

Medical Services

Colombia Asia Hospital (☎085-437755; <http://columbiaasia.com/miri>; Jln Bulan Sabit; ☎24hr) A 35-bed private hospital, used by many expats, with a 24-hour accident and emergency ward and a 24-hour ambulance. Situated 4km northeast of the Mega Hotel.

Miri City Medical Centre (☎085-426622; www.mcmcmiri.com; 916-920 Jln Hokkien) Has an ambulance, a 24-hour accident and emergency department and various private clinics. Accepts direct payment for in-patient care from certain insurance companies. Conveniently located in the city centre.

Post

Main Post Office (Jln Post; ☎8am-4pm Mon-Fri, to 2.30pm Sat)

Tourist Information

National Park Booking Office (☎085-434184; www.sarawakforestry.com; 452 Jln Melayu; ☎8am-5pm Mon-Fri) Inside the Visitors Information Centre. Has details on Sarawak's national parks and can book beds and rooms at Niah and Lambir Hills (but not at Gunung Mulu or Similajau).

Visitors Information Centre (☎085-434181; www.sarawaktourism.com; 452 Jln Melayu; ☎8am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-3pm Sat, Sun & public holidays) The helpful staff can provide city maps, information on accommodation and a list of licensed guides. Situated in a little park.

Visas

Immigration Department (Jabatan Imigresen; ☎085-442117; www.imi.gov.my; 2nd fl, Yulan Plaza, cnr Jln Kingsway & Jln Brooke; ☎8am-5pm Mon-Thu, 8-11.45am & 2.15-5pm Fri) For visa extensions.



Getting There & Away

Miri is 212km northeast of Bintulu and 36km southwest of the Brunei border.

Air

AirAsia (www.airasia.com) can get you to Kuching, Kota Kinabalu (KK), Kuala Lumpur (KL), Johor Bahru (across the causeway from Singapore) and Singapore, while **Malaysia Airlines** (www.malaysiaairlines.com) flies to KL.

Miri is the main hub of the Malaysia Airlines subsidiary **MASwings** (www.maswings.com), whose inexpensive flights serve destinations such as Gunung Mulu National Park, Bario and Ba Kelalan (in the Kelabit Highlands), Kuching, Sibul, Bintulu, Marudi, Limbang, Lawas, Pulau Labuan and KK.

Miri's **airport** (Jln Airport) has a separate check-in area for MASwings' 'Rural Air Service' routes, eg to Gunung Mulu National Park and Bario. If you're flying on a Twin Otter, you'll be

asked to weigh yourself on a giant scale while holding your carry-on.

Free wi-fi is available at Starbuck's, on the check-in level. In the departure area (beyond security), the Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf also has wi-fi; the password is posted next to the cash register.

Bus & Van

Long-distance buses use the Pujut Bus Terminal, about 4km northeast of the centre.

Once or twice an hour, buses head to Kuching (RM80, 12 to 14 hours, departures from 6am to 10pm) via the inland (old) Miri-Bintulu highway, with stops at Lambir Hills National Park, Batu Niah Junction (access point for Niah National Park; RM10 to RM12, 1½ hours), Bintulu (RM20 to RM27, 3½ hours) and Sibul (RM40 to RM50, seven to eight hours). This route is highly competitive so it pays to shop around. Taking a spacious 'VIP bus', with just three seats across, is like flying 1st class! Companies include **Bintang Jaya** (☎085-432178, 085-438301), **Bus Asia** (Biamas; ☎414999, hotline 082-411111; <http://mybus.com.my>) and **Miri Transport Company** (MTC; ☎085-438161; [www.mtcmiri.com](http://mtcmiri.com)).

Bintang Jaya also has services northeast to Limbang (RM45, four hours), Lawas (RM75, six hours) and KK (RM90, 10 hours). Buses leave Miri at 8.30am; departures from KK are at 7am. **Borneo Bus** (☎010-967 6648) serves the same destinations, except on Wednesday, at 7.45am; departures from KK are also at 7.45am. Bus Asia has a bus to Limbang at 2pm. Be aware that with all these companies, getting off in Brunei is not allowed.

i Getting Around

To/From the Airport

A red-and-yellow **taxi** (☎013-838 1000; ☎24hr) from the airport to the city centre (15 minutes, in traffic 25 minutes) costs RM22 (RM33 from 11.45pm to 6am); a *kupon teksi* (taxi coupon) can be purchased at the **taxi desk** (☎7am-11pm) just outside the baggage-claim area (next to the car-rental desks). If you're heading from town to the airport, the fare is RM20. Spacious blue 'executive taxis' charge RM30.

Bus 28 links the local bus station with the airport (RM2.60) every 1½ hours or so; last departures are at 5.20pm (from the airport) and 6.30pm (from the local bus station). At the airport, the stop is on the Arrivals Island in front of the terminal (look for an upright reading 'Bas').

Bus

Local bus transport is handled by three companies: Miri City Bus, Miri Transport Company (MTC) and Miri Belait Transport. The **local bus station** (Jln Padang), next to the Visitors Information Centre, has schedules posted. Fares start at RM1; most lines run from 7am to 6pm.

MTC buses 20 and 33A link the local bus station with Pujut Bus Terminal (RM1.60 to RM2.60, hourly until 6.30pm).

Car

Most of Miri's guesthouses are happy to organise private transport to area destinations such as Lambir Hills National Park (RM85 return) and Niah National Park (RM180 return).

The half-dozen car rental companies with desks at Miri Airport, just outside of baggage claim, include:

FT Car Rental (☎085-438415; www.ftcarrental.com)

Golden System Car Rental (☎085-613359; www.gocar.com.my)

Hertz (☎012-879 2979, 085-614740; www.hertz.com; ☎8am-5pm, closed Sun & public holidays)

Kong Teck Car Rental (☎085-617767; www.kongteck.com.my)

Taxi

Taxi stations are sprinkled around the city centre. A short cab ride around downtown is RM10, while a ride from the centre to the Pujut Bus Terminal costs RM15. Taxis run by the **Miri Taxi Association** (☎085-432 277; ☎24hr) can be summoned by phone 24 hours a day.

NORTHEASTERN SARAWAK

Gunung Mulu National Park

Also known as the **Gunung Mulu World Heritage Area** (☎085-792300; www.mulupark.com; adult/child for 5-day pass RM30/10; ☎HQ office 8am-5pm), this park is one of the most majestic and thrilling nature destinations anywhere in Southeast Asia. No surprise, then, that Unesco declared it a World Heritage Site in 2005.

Few national parks anywhere in the world pack so many natural marvels into such a small area. Home to **caves** (www.mulucaves.org) of mind-boggling proportions, otherworldly geological phenomena such as the Pinnacles, and brilliant old-growth tropical rainforest (the park has 17 different vegetation zones), this is truly one of the world's wonders.

Among the remarkable features in this 529-sq-km park are its two highest peaks, Gunung Mulu (2376m) and Gunung Api (1710m). In between are rugged karst

GETTING TO BRUNEI: MIRI TO BANDAR SERI BEGAWAN

Getting to the border The only company that's allowed to take passengers from Miri's Pujut Bus Terminal to destinations inside Brunei is **PHLS** (Jesselton Express; in Brunei +673-718-3838, +673-719-3835, +673-717-7755, in Miri 085-438301), which sends buses to Bandar Seri Begawan (BSB; RM40) via Kuala Belait (RM25) and Seria (RM25) at 8.15am and 3.45pm. Tickets are sold at the Bintang Jaya counter. Another option to BSB (RM50, 2¾ hours) is to take a **private van** (☑ in BSB +673-887 7642, in Miri 016-873 2742) from Pujut Bus Terminal; hotel pickup can be arranged. For details, contact the Dillenia (p433) (Mrs Lee), Minda (p435) or Highlands (p435) guesthouses in Miri or Miri's Visitors Information Centre (p437).

At the border Border formalities are usually quick and for most nationalities Bruneian visas are free (see p471 for more details), but the process can slow down buses.

Moving on Brunei's Serasa Ferry Terminal, 20km northeast of BSB, is linked by ferry with Pulau Labuan, from where boats go to Menumbok in Sabah. Several buses a day go from BSB to Sarawak's Limbang Division and destinations in Sabah. If you're eventually headed overland to Sabah, make sure you have enough pages in your passport for 10 new chops (stamps).

See p466 for details on doing the trip in the opposite direction.

mountains, deep gorges with crystal-clear rivers, and a unique mosaic of habitats supporting fascinating and incredibly diverse wildlife. Mulu's most famous trekking attractions are the Pinnacles, a forest of razor-sharp limestone spires, and the so-called Headhunters' Trail, which follows an old tribal war path down to Limbang.

Some cave tours (especially the more difficult ones) and treks (especially the longer ones) are booked out well in advance.

The park's facilities are managed by Borsarmulu, a controversial private company partly owned by the sister of Sarawak's chief minister.

Sights & Activities

When you register, park staff will give you a placemat-sized schematic map of the park on which you can plan out your daily activities. HQ staff are generally very helpful in planning itineraries and are happy to (try to) accommodate special needs and interests (eg for family-friendly activities).

All the plankwalks (eg to the entrance to the Deer Cave) are wheelchair-accessible but cave interiors are not.

The park's excellent website (www.mulu.com) and the brochures available at park HQ have details on walks and boat trips not covered here.

Activities Without Guides

Visitors are not allowed to go inside any of the caves without a qualified guide, but you

can take a number of **jungle walks** unaccompanied so long as you inform the park office (or, when it's closed, someone across the path in the Park Security building). For instance, you can walk to the **Bat Observatory** near the entrance to the Deer Cave and to **Paku Waterfall** (3km one-way), where it's possible to swim.

Mulu Discovery Centre

MUSEUM

(☉7.30am-9pm) Offers a fine introduction to the park as a 'biodiversity hotspot' and to its extraordinary geology. Situated in the new HQ building, between the park office and Café Mulu.

FREE Tree Top Tower

BIRDWATCHING

(admission free, key deposit RM50) Basically a 30m-high bird hide. The best time to spot our feathered friends is early in the morning (5am to 9am) or in the late afternoon and early evening (4pm to 8pm). Reserve a time slot and pick up the key at park HQ or, after 4.30pm, from Park Security (across the boardwalk from the park office). Situated about 500m from park HQ.

Guided Forest Walks

Nightwalk

WALKING

(Night Shift; per person RM10; ☉7pm except if raining) The ideal first-night introduction to the park's nocturnal fauna, this 1½- to two-hour walk (the route varies) wends its way through alluvial forest. Creatures you're very likely to see – but only after the guide points them out – include tree frogs just

1cm long, enormous spiders, vine snakes that are a dead ringer for a vine wrapped around a branch, and stick insects (phasmids), extraordinary creatures up to 30cm long that look like they've been assembled from pencils and toothpicks. If you put your torch (bring one!) up to eye level and shine it into the foliage, the eyes of spiders and other creatures will reflect brightly back.

Don't wear insect repellent or you risk repelling some of the insects you're trying to see. Mozzies are not a problem.

If you order dinner at the Wild Mulu Café before heading out, you can pick it up when you return (make sure you're back before 9.30pm). Eateries outside the park stay open later.

You can take the nightwalk trail on your own, without a guide, either before 5pm (so that your scent, which scares away the wildlife, dissipates before the guided group comes through) or after 8pm. Make sure you inform either the park office or, when it's closed, someone in the Park Security pavilion. Between 5pm and 8pm, you can design your own nightwalk by taking trails the guided group isn't using.

Mulu Canopy Skywalk

WALKING

(per person RM35; ☼departures every 1 or 2 hrs 7am-2pm) Climbing up into the rainforest canopy is the only way to see what a tropical rainforest is all about because most of the flora and fauna do their thing high up in the trees, not down on the ground, where less than 2% of the forest's total sunlight is available. Mulu's 480m-long skywalk, unforgettably anchored to a series of huge trees, has handy signage and is one of the best in Southeast Asia. Often gets booked out early – for a specific time slot, reserve as soon as you've got your flight.

Show Caves

Mulu's 'show caves' (the park's name for caves that can be visited without specialised training or equipment) are its most popular attraction and for good reason: they are, quite simply, awesome. All are accessible on guided walks from park HQ. Bring a powerful torch.

Deer Cave & Lang's Cave

CAVE

(per person RM20; ☼departures at 2pm & 2.30pm) A lovely 3km walk (40 minutes to 60 minutes) through the rainforest along a plankwalk takes you to these adjacent caverns. The highlight here is not so much what's in the caves as what comes out of them

every evening around dusk (unless it's raining): millions of bats in spiralling, twirling clouds that look a bit like swarms of cartoon bees. It's an awe-inspiring sight. The bats' corkscrew trajectory is designed to foil the dinner plans of bat hawks perched on the surrounding cliffs. Count on getting back to park HQ at around 7pm.

The **Mulu Bat-Cam** (www.muluparkbatcams.com) – in fact, five infrared webcams – follows the lives of bats inside the Deer Cave. It's not internet live-streamed yet but you can see the feed at the **Bat Observatory**, next to the cave's grassy bat-viewing amphitheatre, as well as back at HQ in the park office.

The Deer Cave – over 2km in length and 174m high – is the world's largest cave passage open to the public. (It was considered the world's largest cave passage, full stop, until what may be an even larger one was discovered in Vietnam in 2009.) It is home to two million to three million bats belonging to 12 species (more than in any other single cave in the world) who cling to the roof in a seething black mass as they gear up for their evening prowls.

We're not sure who did the calculations or how, but it's said that the Deer Cave's bats devour 30 tonnes of mosquitoes every night. That's one reason why mosquito bites are almost unknown at Mulu.

If it's raining, the bats usually (but not always) stay home because echolocation (the way they find prey) is not very good at honing in on flying insects amid an onslaught of raindrops.

Wind Cave & Clearwater Cave

CAVE

(per person incl boat ride RM50; ☼departures at 8.45am & 9.15am) Zipping along an upland jungle river in a flat-bottomed longboat is not a bad way to start the day! This tour takes about four hours, leaving time for another cave visit in the afternoon – or the afternoon flight to Miri.

The Wind Cave, named for the deliciously cool breezes that flow through it, has several chambers – including the cathedral-like King's Chamber – filled with phantasmagorical forests of stalactites and stalagmites. Clearwater Cave is vast – as of 2012, 225km of passages had been surveyed – of which only a tiny segment is open to casual visitors. As the name suggests, the highlight here is an underground clearwater river.

After visiting the caves, you can take a dip in the refreshingly cool waters of a sandy

GUIDES, RESERVATIONS & FEES

For almost all caves, walks and treks in **Gunung Mulu National Park** (☎085-792300; www.mulupark.com), visitors must be accompanied by a guide licensed by Sarawak Forestry, generally supplied either by the park or by an adventure tour agency (eg those based in Kuching, Miri or Limbang). Prices in this chapter are for tours booked directly through the park, as are the time frames for making reservations; agencies charge considerably more but also supply extras, such as meals, and can often offer more flexibility when it comes to advance booking.

If you've got your heart set on adventure caving, or on trekking to the Pinnacles or up to the summit of Gunung Mulu, advance reservations – by phone or email (enquiries@mulupark.com) – are a must. They're doubly important if you'll be coming in July, August or September, when some routes are booked out several months ahead, and are absolutely crucial if your travel dates are not flexible. If this is your situation, don't buy your air tickets until your trek or caving dates are confirmed.

Bookings are not a zero sum game: if the park has sufficient advance notice of your plans, they may be able to reassign guides to accommodate you. And if you can spend a week or two hanging out at the park (this usually means staying in a basic guesthouse outside the park's boundaries as in-park accommodation is in very short supply), trekking and caving slots do sometimes open up.

The park's own trekking and caving guides are well trained and speak good English but there are only about 15 of them. Park administrators have been working to improve the quality of the guides but this process has excluded – and thus angered – some locals who used to earn a living as (semi-qualified) park guides.

Some travellers hire freelance guides unattached to a tour agency, eg from a nearby village. Despite being licensed by Sarawak Forestry (they wouldn't be allowed to operate in the park if they weren't), such guides' nature knowledge and English skills vary widely, from excellent to barely sufficient. In addition, they may lack state-of-the-art safety training and equipment (eg two-way radios, which the park supplies to all of its own guides) and, perhaps most importantly, are unlikely to have proper insurance, a factor that could be crucial if a helicopter evacuation is necessary.

A caving group must consist of at least four participants (including the guide) so that if someone is injured, one person can stay with them and the other two can head out of the cave together to seek help.

Park prices for caving and treks are now on a straight per-person basis (minimum three people).

swimming hole so don't forget your swimsuit; changing facilities are available. It's no longer possible to walk back to park HQ.

Tours begin with a stop at the riverside village of Batu Bungan, set up by the government as part of a campaign to discourage the nomadic lifestyle of the Penan. Locals sell trinkets and handicrafts.

Fast Lane

CAVE

(per person incl boat RM55; ☼1.30pm) This route through Lagang Cave has gotten rave reviews since it opened in 2010 thanks to its extraordinary stalactites and stalagmites. Keep an eye out for 'moonmilk', a fibrous mineral formation – known to scientists as Lublinite – created when bacteria break down calcite, the main component of limestone. Don't touch it – it's very fragile!

Getting to the cave requires a one-hour walk; the entire visit takes three or four hours. Groups are limited to eight people.

Adventure Caves

Cave routes that require special equipment and a degree of caving (spelunking) experience are known here as 'adventure caves'. Rosters for the eight half- or all-day options fill up early so reserve well ahead. Groups are limited to eight participants. Heavy rains can cause caves to flood.

Caving routes are graded beginner, intermediate and advanced; guides determine each visitors' suitability based on their previous caving experience. If you have no background in spelunking, you will be required to do an intermediate route (Racer Cave) before moving on to an advanced one.

Minimum ages are 12 for intermediate and 16 for advanced. The park office has details on 'family adventure caving', ie a section of Lagang Cave that's suitable for the entire family. Fees include a helmet and a headlamp; bring closed shoes, a first-aid kit and clothes you won't mind getting dirty in.

Keep in mind that adventure caving is not for everyone, and halfway into a cave passage is not the best time to discover that you suffer from claustrophobia, fear the dark or simply don't like slithering in the mud with all sorts of unknown creepy crawlies.

Sarawak Chamber

ADVANCED CAVING

(per person RM225; ☺ departure at 7am) Measuring an incredible 700m long, 400m wide and 70m high, this chamber – discovered in 1981 – has been called the world's largest enclosed space. Don't count on seeing much, though – ordinary lights are no match for the ocean of black emptiness, big enough to park 10 A380s lined up nose to tail. This circuit is very demanding – getting to the cave and back involves six hours of trekking (three hours each way) and moving around inside the cave requires some use of fixed ropes. The whole route takes 10 to 15 hours.

Clearwater Connection

ADVANCED CAVING

(per person RM170) This 4.8km, four- to eight-hour circuit starts at Wind Cave and heads into the wilds of the vast Clearwater Cave system. There's a good bit of scrambling and the route includes a 1.5km river section.

Lagang Cave

INTERMEDIATE CAVING

(per person RM95) Lots of stalagmites, stalactites and boulders, plus an ancient river bed. No climbing. Takes two to four hours.

Racer Cave

INTERMEDIATE CAVING

(per person RM95; ☺ departure at 9am) Has some rope-assisted sections that require a bit of upper-body strength. Named after the non-dangerous cave racer snake, which dines mainly on bats. Takes two to four hours.

Trekking & Climbing

Mulu offers some of the best and most accessible **jungle trekking** in Borneo. The forest here is in excellent condition and there are routes for every level of fitness and skill.

Expect rain, leeches, slippery and treacherous conditions, and a very hot workout – carry lots of water. Guides are required for overnights, except for the Headhunters' Trail. Book well ahead. Don't even think of

taking one of these treks if you've got asthma, or heart or knee problems.

Bring a first-aid kit and a torch/flashlight.

The Pinnacles

TREKKING

(per person RM325) The Pinnacles are an incredible formation of 45m-high stone spires protruding from the forested flanks of Gunung Api. Getting there involves a boat ride (you can stop off at Wind Cave and Clearwater Cave for a fee of RM20) and, between two overnights at Camp 5, an unrelentingly steep 2.4km ascent; the final section – much more gruelling than anything on Mt Kinabalu – involves some serious clambering and some rope and ladder work. Coming down is just as taxing so when you stagger into Camp 5, a swim in the cool, clear river may look pretty enticing. The trail passes through some gorgeous jungle.

Bring shoes that will give you traction on sharp and slippery rocks, bedding (many people find that a sarong is warm enough at Camp 5) and enough food (eg instant noodles) for six meals. Cooking equipment and gas stoves are available at Camp 5, home – recent climbers report – to lots of stinging bees.

Gunung Mulu Summit

TREKKING

(per person RM385, with a porter RM475) The climb to the summit of Gunung Mulu (2376m) – described recently by one satisfied ascender as 'gruelling' and, near the top, 'treacherous' – is a classic Borneo adventure. If you're very fit and looking for real adventure, this 24km trek may be for you.

Bring proper hiking shoes, a sleeping bag (Camp 4 can get quite chilly), a sleeping pad (unless you don't mind sleeping on wooden boards), rain gear (some groups end up having rain the whole way) and enough food for four days. The camps along the way have very basic cooking equipment, including a gas stove. Bring water-purification tablets if you're leery of drinking the rainwater collected at shelters en route. Near the summit you may spend much of your time inside clouds; a fleece jacket is the best way to ward off the damp and cold. Recent trekkers report having been visited by rats at Camp 3 and by squirrels who were 'keen on noodles' at Camp 4. The trip takes four days and three nights.

Headhunters' Trail

TREKKING

The physically undemanding Headhunters' Trail is a backdoor route from Mulu to Limbang and can be done in either direction,

although most people start at the park. The route is named after the Kayan war parties that used to make their way up the Sungai Melinau from the Baram area to the Melinau Gorge, then dragged their canoes overland to the Sungai Terikan to raid the peoples of the Limbang region.

Starting in Limbang, it's possible travel up to the park without a guide, hiring transport (a vehicle and then a boat) as you go. The journey takes two days and one night. If you're on your own, don't forget to contact the park to reserve sleeping space at Camp 5.

Heading down to Limbang, getting from Kuala Terikan (11km on foot from park HQ) or nearby Lubang Cina, both uninhabited, to Medamit (linked by road with Limbang) is possible only if you arrange in advance to be met by a boatman or a guide. Mr Lim of Limbang-based **Borneo Touch Ecotour** (☎013-844 3861; www.walk2mulu.com) can organise a boat and a van in either direction for RM500 for up to five people, and also offers well-reviewed tour packages.

Sleeping

Accommodation options range from long-house-style luxury to extremely basic digs. MASwings uses 68-seat turboprops for the Miri-Mulu route, so depending on how long people stay, there may end up being more seats on the planes than there are places to stay inside the park.

Camping is no longer permitted at park HQ but you can pitch a tent at some of the guesthouses just outside the park (across the bridge from HQ). Elsewhere in the park, the only places you can sleep out – and then only if you have reservations (space is limited) – are Camp 5 (tents prohibited) and several huts along the Gunung Mulu Summit trail.

Inside the National Park

Park HQ, a lovely spot set amid semi-wild jungle, has 24-hour electricity, tap water that's safe to drink and a total of 88 beds. All private rooms have attached bathrooms. Prices (except for Camp 5) include a delicious breakfast.

If you'll be travelling from July to September, staff recommend booking in-park beds before purchasing plane tickets – just call (☎085-792300) or email (enquiries@mulupark.com). Reservations cannot be made through Sarawak Forestry.

Rooms can be cancelled up to 48 hours ahead without penalty, which is why space

sometimes opens up late in the game; phone for last-minute availability.

Garden Bungalows

BUNGALOW \$\$

(s/d/tr incl breakfast RM200/230/250; ☎) Opened in 2011, these eight spacious units come with verandahs.

Chalets

CHALET \$\$

(s/d/tr/q incl breakfast RM170/180/215/250; ☎) Each of the two chalets has two rooms and a huge living room.

Longhouse Rooms

GUESTHOUSE \$\$

(s/d/tr/q incl breakfast RM170/180/215/250; ☎) There are eight of these, four in each of two wooden buildings.

Hostel

HOSTEL \$

(dm incl breakfast RM40) All 20 beds are in a clean, spacious dormitory-style room with ceiling fans. Lockers are available for a RM20 deposit.

Camp 5

CAMPGROUND \$

(per person including boat ride RM160) An open-air sleeping platform with mats, cooking facilities (including cooking gas) and bathrooms. Space is limited (to 50 people) so only hikers who are heading up to the Pinnacles or down the Headhunters' Trail can stay here. Reserve ahead and pay at the park office. It's warm enough here without a sleeping bag (a sarong will do).

Outside the National Park

Several ultra-budget places, unaffiliated with the park, are located just across the bridge from park HQ, along the banks of the Melinau River. Reservations are not necessary so if you don't mind very basic digs, you can fly up without worrying about room availability.

For those on a generous budget, the Mulu Marriott Resort & Spa is also almost never full.

Contact Miri-based **Borneo Tropical Adventure** (☎085-419337; www.borneotropicaladventures.com) for details on staying at the mid-range Benarat Inn.

Mulu Marriott Resort & Spa

RESORT \$\$\$

(☎085-792388; www.marriott.com; ☎☎☎) Situated 3km from park HQ, this 100-room, all-wood complex is finally getting the major make-over it's badly needed for years.

Mulu River Lodge

HOSTEL \$

(Edward Nyipa Homestay; ☎012-852 7471; dm incl breakfast RM35) Has 30 beds, most in a giant,

non-bunk dorm room equipped with clean showers and toilets at one end. Electricity flows from 5pm to 11.30pm. This is the only guesthouse outside the park with a proper septic system.

Mulu Homestay

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☑ for Betty 012-875 3517; beds RM15, campsites per person RM5) Has 30 beds (more are being added), electricity from 6pm to 9pm and very personable owners.

Melinau Homestay

GUESTHOUSE \$

(MC: ☑ for Diang 012-871 1372; dm RM20) Has seven extremely basic rooms, river-water bucket showers and flickering electricity from 6pm to 10pm. This is the third guesthouse along the river from the bridge.



Eating

A handful of tiny shops sell a very limited selection of food items, eg instant noodles. Most food is flown in, which partly explains why prices are significantly higher than on the coast (eg RM6 for a large bottle of water).

Inexpensive curries, fried rice and noodle dishes are available at several places across the bridge from park HQ.

Cooking is not allowed at any park accommodation except Camps 1, 3, 4 and 5.

Café Mulu

ASIAN, WESTERN \$\$

(mains RM740-17; ☎ 7.30am-9.30pm, last orders 9pm) The Berawan women who work here make great breakfasts (free if you're staying in the park, RM15.90 otherwise) and a few Western items, but the standouts are local dishes such as the spectacular *Mulu laksa*. A beer or a glass of wine, supremely relaxing after a day's hiking, costs RM9.60. Staff are happy to prepare packed lunches (RM18).



Information

For sums over RM100, the park accepts Visa and MasterCard (but not American Express). Cash and travellers cheques can be exchanged at the Mulu Marriott Resort & Spa. There are no ATMs at the park.

The shop at park HQ has an excruciatingly slow **internet computer** (RM5 per hour; RM10 per hour if you're staying outside the park) but it's usually out-of-service. There's another **internet-enabled computer** (RM35 per hour) at the Mulu Marriott Resort & Spa, which is supposed to have wi-fi in the lobby.

The **clinic** in the nearby village of Batu Bungan is now staffed by a doctor and has a dispensary (small pharmacy).



Getting There & Away

Air

MASwings (www.maswings.com.my) flies 68-seat ATR 72-500 turboprops from/to Miri and Kuching. Departures from Miri are at 9.20am and 1.50pm and from Mulu at 10.10am and 2.40pm, with onward flights to Kota Kinabalu (KK) and other destinations.



Getting Around

Park HQ is a walkable 1.5km from the airport and 3km from Mulu Marriott Resort & Spa. Vans run by **Melinau Transportation** (☑ for Diang 012-871 1372) and other companies meets incoming flights at the airport; transport to park HQ and the adjacent guesthouses costs RM5 per person. Oversized tuk-tuks shuttle guests between park HQ and Mulu Marriott Resort & Spa (RM6 per person one-way).

It's possible to hire local longboats for excursions to destinations such as the government-built Penan longhouse village of Long Iman (RM60 per person return, minimum three people), 40 minutes away by river.

Kelabit Highlands

Nestled in Sarawak's northeastern corner, the upland rainforests of the Kelabit (keh-lah-bit) Highlands are sandwiched between Gunung Mulu National Park and the Indonesian state of East Kalimantan. The main activity here, other than enjoying the clean, cool air, is trekking from longhouse to longhouse on mountain trails. Unfortunately, logging roads – ostensibly for 'selective' logging – are encroaching and some of the Highlands' primary forests have already succumbed to the chainsaw.

The area is home to the Kelabits, an Orang Ulu (inland Dayak) group who number only about 6500 worldwide and who inspire awe throughout Sarawak for their unparalleled ability to wrangle government investments and subsidies. For an excellent 'profile' of the Kelabits by Dr Poline Bala, a Bario-born anthropologist, see www.unimas.my/ebario/community.html. There's more information on Bario and the Kelabits, some of it out-of-date, at www.kelabit.net and on Facebook – see www.kelabit.org.

BARIO

POP 800

The 'capital' of the Highlands, Bario consists of about a dozen 'villages' – each with its own church – spread over a beautiful valley, much (though less and less) of it given over

to growing the renowned local rice. Some of the appeal lies in the mountain climate (the valley is 1500m above sea level) and splendid isolation (the only access is by air and torturous 4WD track), but above all it's the unforced hospitality of the Kelabit people that will quickly win you over. An amazing number of travellers find themselves extending their stays in Bario by days, weeks or even years. Do yourself a favour and get stuck here for a while!

Before the Konfrontasi, Bario consisted of only one small longhouse, but in 1963 residents of longhouses near the frontier fled raids by Indonesian troops and settled here for safety.

Except for a few places powered by a small hydroelectric dam and by photovoltaic cells (a large solar farm is planned), Bario has electricity – provided by private generators – only in the evening. It's hard to imagine life in hyper-social Bario without the mobile phone, a technology unknown in these parts until 2009.

Sights & Activities

The Bario area offers plenty of opportunities for jungle exploration even if you're not a hardcore trekker. Guides can arrange activities such as **fishing**, **bird-watching** and **kayaking** (☑ for Stu 019-807 1640; per boat RM60).

The forests around Bario are a great place to spot pitcher plants, butterflies and even hornbills – and are an exceptional venue for tiger leeches to spot you. Most guesthouses are happy to pack picnic lunches.

Bario Asal Longhouse

LONGHOUSE

This all-wood, 22-door longhouse has the traditional Kelabit layout. On the *dapur* (enclosed front verandah) each family has a hearth, while on the other side of the family units is the *tawa'*, a wide back verandah – essentially an enclosed hall over 100m long – used for weddings, funerals and celebrations and decorated with historic family photos.

A few of the older residents still have earlobes that hang almost down to their shoulders, created by a lifetime of wearing heavy brass earrings. If you'd like a picture, it's good form to chat with them a bit (they may offer you something to drink) and only then to ask if they'd be willing to be photographed. Afterwards you might want to leave a small tip (RM5 or RM10).

Bario Asal has 24-hour electricity (evenings only during dry spells) thanks to a

micro-hydro project salvaged from a larger government-funded project that functioned for just 45 minutes after it was switched on in 1999 (it had been designed to operate on a much larger river).

Tom Harrisson Monument

MEMORIAL

Shaped like a *sapé* (a traditional stringed instrument), this stainless-steel monument, dedicated in 2010, commemorates the March 1945 parachute drop into Bario by British and Australian commandos under the command of British Major Tom Harrisson. Their goal – achieved with great success – was to enlist the help of locals to fight the Japanese, whose cruelty had made them hugely unpopular. For the life story of this colourful and controversial character, see *The Most Offending Soul Alive*, a biography by Judith M Heimann. Harrisson's widow lived in Bario until her death in 2011.

The monument is a short walk up the slope from the Bario Asal Longhouse, on the site of Tom's one-time garden (his post-war house was about 100m from here, where the local cemetery now is).

Junglebluesdream Art Gallery

ART GALLERY

(<http://junglebluesdream.weebly.com>; ☀ daylight hours) Many of artist Stephen Baya's paintings have traditional Kelabit motifs. In April 2013 his colourful illustrations of the Kelabit legend of Tuked Rini were to feature at the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology in Cambridge, England (and in a children's book).

Prayer Mountain

TREKKING

From the Bario Asal Longhouse, it's a steep, slippery ascent (two hours) up to the summit of Prayer Mountain, which has a cross that was erected in 1973, thickets of pitcher plants and amazing views of the Bario Valley and of the mixed Penan and Kelabit hamlet of Arur Dalan, with its three defunct wind turbines. Two-thirds of the way up is what may be the world's least pretentious church.

Sleeping

Bario's various component villages are home to lots of guesthouses where you can meet English-speaking locals and dine on delicious Kelabit cuisine (accommodation prices almost always include board). Some of the most relaxing establishments are a bit out of town (up to 5km). Air-con is not necessary up in Bario but hot water – alas, not yet an option – will some day be

a nice treat. Almost all rooms have shared bathroom facilities. If you're on a very tight budget, enquire about renting a bed without board.

No need to book ahead – available rooms outstrip the space available on flights, and guesthouse owners meet incoming flights at the airport. The places below are listed alphabetically.

Bario Airport Homestay

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎013-835 9009; barioairporthomestay@gmail.com; beds RM20, per person incl board RM80; 🍽️) Five rooms right across the road from the airport terminal. Run by Joanna, the airport's personable dynamo of an operations manager.

Bario Asal Lembaa Longhouse

HOMESTAY \$

(☎for Jenette 014-590 7500, for Peter 014-893 1139; jenetteulun@yahoo.com; beds RM20, per person incl 3 meals RM60; 🍽️) Run as a cooperative by the entire longhouse. Some local families let out rooms, while others do the cooking. A great way to experience longhouse living. Transport from the airport costs RM10 per person each way.

De Plateau Lodge

HOMESTAY \$

(☎019-855 9458; deplateau@gmail.com; per person incl meals RM80; 🍽️) Situated about 2km east of the centre (bear left at the fork), this two-storey wooden chalet has seven rooms (including one triple) and a homey living room. It is owned by Douglas, a former guide. Recent visitors have missed flights due to transport confusion so make sure your needs are clear.

Gem's Lodge

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎013-828 0507; gems_lodge@yahoo.com; per person incl meals RM70) Situated 5km south-east of town (bear right at the fork) five minutes from the longhouse village of Pa' Umor. Managed by Jaman, one of Bario's nicest and most experienced guides, this

place is tranquillity incarnate, with eight pleasant rooms, a cosy common area, river swimming and solar power. Transport to/from the airport by 4WD costs RM25 per person.

Junglebluesdream

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎019-884 9892; <http://junglebluesdream.weebly.com>; per person incl board RM80; 🍽️) Owned by artist and one-time guide Stephen Baya, a Bario native, and his friendly Danish wife Tine, this super-welcoming lodge (and art gallery) has four mural-decorated rooms, good-quality beds and quilts, and fantastic Kelabit food. Guests can consult Stephen's extraordinary hand-drawn town and trekking maps. Organises kayaking excursions.

Libal Paradise

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎019-807 1640; per person RM65, dm without board RM25; 🍽️) Surrounded by a verdant fruit and veggie garden where you can pick your own pineapples, this sustainably-run farm – an idyllic spot to chill – is run by a local woman, Dorkas Parir, and her Canadian husband Stu, who runs kayaking trips. Solar collectors power 24-hour LED lighting. Kitchen facilities are available. To get there from the airport terminal, walk eastward along the road that parallels the runway.

Nancy & Harriss

GUESTHOUSE \$

(Hill View Lodge; ☎013-850 5850, 019-858 5850; nancyharriss@yahoo.com; dm RM30; per person incl board RM70) Run by a former guide whose grandmother was once married to Tom Harrisson, this rambling place has seven guest rooms, a lovely verandah, a library-equipped lounge and endearingly tacky floor coverings. Situated 250m along a dirt track south of the main road; the turn-off is just east of Kaludai. Prices include airport transfer.

THE 'EBARIO MODEL'

Bario has produced some remarkable leaders, including local councillor John Tarawe, CEO of the award-winning internet initiative **eBario** (www.unimas.my/ebario and www.ebario.org), who is much sought after around the world by groups (eg the UNDP) that are interested in 'community mobilisation' among indigenous groups. His efforts to plug the Highlands into the internet (even in remote villages he'd like the children to grow up 'IT savvy') and establish a hugely popular community radio station, **Radio Tauh** (94MHz FM; 📻7.30-9am or 10am & 7-9pm or 10pm Mon-Sat), have been so groundbreaking that NGOs on distant continents are adopting the 'eBario model'.

THE PENAN

The Kelabit Highlands are home not only to the Kelabits but also the Penan, an indigenous group that was nomadic – surviving almost exclusively on hunting and gathering – until quite recently and has fared much less well than other indigenous groups in modern Malaysia. The Penan are often looked down upon, and discriminated against, by other Orang Ulu groups. Around Bario, if you see barefoot people wearing ragged clothes who drop their gaze when you approach, you can be sure they're Penan. Kelabits have intermarried with Chinese, Westerners, Malays and other Orang Ulu groups for several generations but the first Kelabit-Penan marriage took place only recently.

Since independence, the Sarawak state government has often sold off rainforest lands to well-connected logging companies and then evicted the Penan and other Dayak groups with minimal or no compensation. The Swiss rainforest and human-rights advocate **Bruno Manser** (www.bmf.ch) spent years living with the Penan and agitating to protect their human and civil rights. He disappeared near Bario in May 2000 and is presumed dead – many people, in the Kelabit Highlands and abroad, suspect he was murdered.

Ngimat Ayu's House

GUESTHOUSE \$

(☎013-840 6187; engimat_scott@yahoo.com; per person incl board RM95) This brown, two-storey place, run by the impressive but personable son of the Kelabits' former *pemancha* (paramount chief), has seven rooms and a chill-out verandah with rice-field views. Situated on a slope 200m east of the yellow public library. Rates include transport from and to the airport.

Eating

Most guesthouses offer full board – almost always delicious Kelabit cuisine – but Bario also has several modest eateries. **Pasar Bario**, the town's yellow-painted commercial centre, is home to half-a-dozen basic **cafes** (mains RM4; ☉7am-10pm, closed Sun morning) selling mainly generic fried noodle and rice dishes, though Kelabit food can sometimes be special-ordered.

Drinking

Finding a beer in Bario can be a bit of a challenge. This is a very Evangelical town – you're as likely to hear Christian country as the sound of the *sapé* – so most establishments do not serve alcohol, and some of those that do keep it hidden. But what was it that Matthew once said? 'Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find!'

At Pasar Bario, don't go through the swinging doors of the Bario Saloon looking for a stiff drink – it's a unisex beauty salon!

Y2K

BAR

(☉7am-midnight or later) Local men quaff beer (RM4 to RM6) and play pool. Has karaoke in the evening (until 10pm).

Keludai

BAR

(mains RM4; ☉noon-1am or 2am) An all-wood saloon with beer (RM4), instant noodles, satellite TV and a pool table.

Shopping

Sinah Rang

HANDICRAFTS

(Bario Asal Longhouse; ☉daily) Sinah sells lovely Kelabit beadwork, all locally made, from her living room. This is a good place to pick up a *kabo'* (RM50 to RM100, depending on the quality of the beads), a beadwork pendant shaped like a little beer barrel that's worn around the neck by Kelabit men.

Y2K

GENERAL STORE

(☉7am-midnight or later) An old-fashioned, Old West-style general store that sells everything from SIM cards to something called Zam-Zam Hair Oil.

Information

There are no banks, ATMs or credit-card facilities anywhere in the Kelabit Highlands so bring plenty of small-denomination banknotes for accommodation, food and guides, plus some extra in case you get stranded. Commerce is limited to a few basic shops, some of them in Pasar Bario, Bario's bright yellow commercial centre.

The best Malaysian cell-phone company to have up here is Celcom (Maxis works at the airport and in parts of Bario; Digi is useless). The airport has wi-fi, as do several guesthouses.

Bario Telecentre (www.unimas.my/ebario; Gatuman Bario; per hr RM4; ☉9.30-11.30am & 2-4pm, closed Sat afternoon & Sunday) Solar-powered internet access.

Klinik Kesihatan Bario (☎085-796404; Airport Rd intersection; ☉8am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Thu, 8-11.45am & 2.15-5pm Fri,

emergency 24hr) Bario's innovative, ecologically sustainable rural health clinic, powered by solar energy, has one doctor, two paramedics, a dispensary (small pharmacy) and a helicopter on standby.

i Getting There & Around

AIR

Bario Airport (✈ for Joanna 013-835 9009, for Norman Peter 013-824 8006) is linked with Miri twice a day by Twin Otters operated by **MASwings** (www.maswings.com.my). Weather (especially high winds) not infrequently causes delays and cancellations. For flight updates or if you're having a problem making a flight out of Bario, just ring the friendly staff at the airport.

Twin Otters have strict weight limits, so much so that checked baggage is limited to 10kg, carry-ons to 5kg and passengers themselves are weighed on a giant scale when they check in. Enforcement is particularly strict on the way up because planes have to carry enough fuel to get back to Miri, and more cargo is flown into Bario than out. For the same reason, it's easier to find a seat from Bario to Miri than the other way around. Consider leaving some of your belongings in Miri at your hotel or guesthouse.

When you land in Bario, the first thing you should do is register for your flight out at the counter – your name will be inscribed in a crumpled old ledger. A schematic map of the Bario area is posted on a nearby wall.

The airport is about a 30-minute walk south of the shophouses but you're bound to be offered a lift on arrival. As you'll notice, the people of Bario treat the air link to Miri almost like their own private airline and absolutely love dropping by the wi-fi-equipped airport terminal to meet flights, hang out with arriving or departing friends, and surf the net.

CAR

The overland trip between Bario and Miri, possible only by 4WD (per person RM150), takes 12 hours at the very least and sometimes a lot more, the determining factors being the weather and the condition of the rough logging roads and their old wooden bridges. When things get ugly, vehicles travel in convoys so when one gets

stuck the others can push or winch it out. At press time, some sectors were being upgraded to make the route safer and more reliable.

A new road from Bario via Pa' Lungan to Ba Kelalan (already connected by road with Lawas) is under construction.

In Bario, 4WD vehicles can be hired for RM250 or RM300 a day including a driver and petrol; guesthouses can make arrangements.

BA KELALAN

Known for its rice, organic vegetables, apples and annual apple festival – and the general vibrancy of its farming sector – the Lun Bawang town of Ba Kelalan is a popular destination for treks from Bario.

Guesthouse options include the nice **Ba Kelalan Apple Lodge Homestay** (per person about RM70), run by **Borneo Jungle Safari** (✈ 013-286 5656, in Miri 085-422595; www.borneojunglesafari.com); the **Ba Kelalan Inn**, the only place in town that serves beer; and the **Green Valley Guesthouse** (per bed RM20).

i Getting There & Away

The only way to get from Ba Kelalan to Bario is on foot (a road via Pa' Lungan is in the works). A rough, 125km logging road links Ba Kelalan with Lawas (per person RM70 to RM80 by 4WD, seven hours, daily).

It's possible to get from Ba Kelalan to Long Bawan in Kalimantan by motorbike.

MASwings (www.maswings.com.my) flies Twin Otters from Ba Kelalan to Lawas and Miri three times a week.

TREKKING IN THE KELABIT HIGHLANDS

The temperate highlands up along Sarawak's far eastern border with Indonesia offer some of the best jungle trekking in Borneo, taking in farming villages, rugged peaks and supremely remote Kenyah, Penan and Kelabit settlements. Most trails traverse a variety of primary and secondary forests, as well as an increasing number of logged areas. Treks from Bario range from easy overnight

BARIO SALT

If you're interested in the Kelabit's culinary traditions, you might want to walk out to Bario's **main tudtu** (literally 'salty sweet'; natural salt lick; overnight facilities planned), under an hour's walk from Pa' Umor, where mineral-rich saline water is put in giant vats over a roaring fire until all that's left is high-iodine salt that goes perfectly with local specialties such as deer and wild boar. This traditional production technique is beginning to die out, but in Bario you can still purchase salt made the old way – look for something that resembles a 20cm-long green Tootsie roll wrapped in a leaf (RM17 to RM20).

RICE & PINEAPPLES

Bario is famous throughout Malaysia for two things: Bario rice, whose grains are smaller and more aromatic than lowland varieties; and sweeter-than-sweet pineapples (RM2.50 in Bario) that are free of the pucker-inducing acidity of their coastal cousins. Outside of the Kelabit Highlands, 1kg of Bario rice can cost a whopping RM16 and Bario pineapples are usually unavailable at any price.

excursions to nearby longhouses to one-week slogs over the border into the wilds of Kalimantan.

While the Highlands are certainly cooler than Borneo's coastal regions, it's still hard work trekking up here (don't forget the altitude) and you should be in fairly good shape to consider a multi-day trek. Be prepared to encounter leeches – many trails are literally crawling with them. Bring extra cell-phone and camera batteries as charging may not be possible.

The routes we list are intended to serve as a starting point. With so many trails in the area, there is ample scope for custom routes and creative planning.

MEGALITHS NEAR BARIO

Hidden deep in the jungle around Bario are scores of mysterious megaliths and other 'cultural sites'. For more information, ask your guide for a copy of the booklet *Stone Culture of the Northern Highlands of Sarawak, Malaysia* (RM20).

At research time, trails equipped with overnight shelters for megalith circuits lasting two to five days were being constructed. Overnight options include:

Pa' Umor Route

TREKKING

From Bario it's a 1½-hour walk – notorious for its legions of lecherous leeches – to **Pa' Umor**, where there's **longhouse accommodation** (☎for Jaman 013-828 0507, for Rian 013-812 8851). Continue on for 2km (50 minutes) and you come to a salt spring.

About 15 minutes from Pa' Umor is Arur Bilit Farm, home to **Batu Narit**, an impressive stone carving featuring a human in the spread-eagled position among its designs.

From the farm, use the log bridge to cross a small river (25 minutes) in order to

reach **Batu Ipak**. According to local legend, this stone formation was created when an angry warrior named Upai Semering pulled out his parang (machete) and took a wrathful swing at the rock, cutting it in two. This circuit should take four or five hours – maybe a tad longer if your guide is a good storyteller.

Pa' Lungan Route

TREKKING

(homestays per person incl board RM70, boat ride up to 4 people RM250) A wide, muddy forest trail – used by water buffalos to pull sleighs carrying goods and, on occasion, medical evacuees – heads from Bario to **Pa' Lungan** (four hours). Unlike almost all the other Highland trails, this one is walkable without a guide as long as you have clear instructions. About halfway along you can stop at **Batu Arit**, a large stone featuring bird carvings and humanoid figures with heart-shaped faces.

From Pa' Lungan it's a two-minute walk to **Batu Ritung**, a 2m stone table (probably a burial site), although no one is quite sure as the site was created outside of living memory. Also near Pa' Lungan (15 minutes away) is **Perupun**, a huge pile of stones of a type assembled to bury the valuables of the dead who had no descendants to receive their belongings.

If you've got a bit more time, you could consider basing yourself for a day or two in Pa' Lungan, believed by many to produce the very best Bario rice. Longhouse homestays, including **Batu Ritung Lodge** (☎019-805 2119; baturitunglodge@yahoo.com), serve Kelabit-style dishes such as *pa'u* (fern) and *puluh* (bamboo shoots).

A scenic boat ride can be arranged to take you on the **Pa' Debpur** from a spot an hour's hike from Pa' Lungan back to Pa' Umur (in Kelabit, *pa'* means 'river').

BARIO TO BA KELALAN

The three- to four-day trek from Bario to Ba Kelalan covers a variety of mostly gentle terrain – some of it on the Indonesian side of the frontier – and gives a good overview of the Kelabit Highlands. An alternative route, the Kalimantan Loop, which takes five to seven days, goes deeper into Kalimantan, passing by Lembudud.

To avoid doubling back, you can trek from Bario to Ba Kelalan and then fly or take a 4WD down to the coast. Remember, though that you'll have to pay the guide for the two days it will take him to walk back to Bario.

HIRING A GUIDE: THE PRACTICALITIES

With very few exceptions, the only way to explore the Kelabit Highlands is to hire a local guide. Fortunately, this could hardly be easier. Any of the guesthouses in Bario can organise a wide variety of short walks and longer treks led by guides they know and rely on. Some of the best guides for longer treks live in Pa' Lungan, an easy walk from Bario. If you link up with other travellers in Bario or Miri, the cost of a guide can be shared.

Although there's a growing shortage of guides, in general it's no problem to just turn up in Bario and make arrangements after you arrive, especially if you don't mind hanging out for day or two in Bario. If you're in a hurry, though, or your trip coincides with the prime tourism months of July and August, consider making arrangements with your guesthouse in advance by email or phone.

The going rate for guides is RM100 per day for either a Bario-based day trip or a longer trek. Some itineraries involve either river trips (highly recommended if the water is high enough) or travel by 4WD – naturally, these significantly increase the cost. The going rate for a porter is RM80 to RM100 a day.

If you are connecting the dots between rural longhouses, expect to pay RM70 for a night's sleep plus three meals (you can opt out of lunch and save RM10 or RM15). Gifts are not obligatory but the people who live in remote longhouses are appreciative if, after you drink tea or coffee with them, you offer RM10 'to cover the costs' or 'to buy pens and paper for the children'.

If your route requires that you camp in the forest, expect to pay approximately RM120 per night; in addition, you may be asked to supply food, which is provided for both you and your guide when you stay in a longhouse. Equipment for jungle camping (eg a sleeping bag, hammock, mozzie net and bed roll) cannot be purchased in Bario so it's a good idea to bring your own, though Bario Asal Longhouse may be able to rent it out.

If you're trekking in one direction only (eg Bario to Ba Kelalan), you will be asked to continue paying the guiding fee while your guide returns home through the jungle (in this scenario, it would take them two days to trek from Ba Kelalan back to Bario).

Detailed topographical maps of Sarawak exist but it's nearly impossible to get hold of them. According to in-the-know locals, the government's calculation seems to be that activists will find it harder to fight for native land rights if they lack proper maps.

BATU LAWI

If you were sitting on the left side of the plane from Miri to Bario, you probably caught a glimpse of the two massive limestone spires known as Batu Lawi, the taller of which soars to 2040m. During WWII they were used as a landmark for parachute drops.

While an ascent of the higher of the two rock formations, known as the 'male peak', is only for expert technical rock climbers, ascending the lower 'female peak' – described by one veteran trekker as 'awe-inspiring' – is possible for fit trekkers without special skills. It's a tough, four- or five-day return trip from Bario. Be prepared to spend the second day passing through areas that have been impacted by logging. Only a handful of guides are experienced enough to tackle Batu Lawi – perhaps the best is Richard from Pa' Ukat.

GUNUNG MURUD

Sarawak's highest mountain (2442m), part of 598-sq-km **Pulong Tau National Park**, is just begging to be climbed, but very few visitors make the effort to put the trip together. This adventure is only for the fittest of the fit. **Borneo Touch Ecotour** (2013-8443861; www.walk2mulu.com) offers four-day, three-night ascents for RM1500 per person (minimum four).

The mountain is linked by trails with both Ba Kelalan and Bario. From Bario, the more common starting point, a typical return trip takes six or seven days. You can also walk from Bario via Gunung Murud to Ba Kelalan (five days one-way), but as you approach Ba Kelalan you'll have to walk along a depressing logging road.

A rough logging road links the base of Gunung Murud with the lowland town of Lawas (five to eight hours by 4WD).

Limbang Division

Shaped like a crab claw, the Limbang Division slices Brunei in two and separates the diminutive sultanate from Sabah. Tourism is underdeveloped in these parts, but Bruneians love popping across the border to find shopping bargains, including cheap beer smuggled in from duty-free Pulau Labuan. As one local put it with just a hint of exaggeration, 'Los Angeles has Tijuana, BSB has Limbang'.

The area, snatched from the sultan of Brunei by Charles Brooke in 1890, is still claimed by Brunei.

LIMBANG

The bustling river port of Limbang (pronounced *lim-bahng*) is something of a backwater, but you may find yourself here before or after taking the Headhunters' Trail to/from Gunung Mulu National Park.

👁 Sights & Activities

Limbang's old town stretches inland from riverfront Jln Wong Tsap En (formerly Main Bazaar) and southward from 12-storey Purnama Hotel, a useful landmark.

Limbang Regional Museum

MUSEUM

(www.museum.sarawak.gov.my; Jln Kubu; ☎9am-4.30pm Tue-Sun) Features well-presented exhibits on the Limbang Division's archaeology, culture and crafts. Situated on the riverbank about 1km south of the Purnama Hotel, on the upper floor of a Charles Brooke fort built in 1897 and rebuilt (after a fire) in 1991.

Limbang Raid Memorial

MEMORIAL

(Jln Wong Tsap En) Commemorates four members of the Sarawak Constabulary and five members of the UK's 42 Commando Royal Marines killed before and during the

famous Limbang Raid on 12 December 1962, which retook the town from rebels of the pro-Indonesian North Kalimantan National Army. As one local put it, 'if the rebels win, we will be Indonesian, not Malaysian'. A trailer for a TV documentary about the raid, *Return to Limbang*, can be found on www.vimeo.com. The memorial is 400m south of the Purnama Hotel, on the riverfront across the street from the police station.

Public Library

LIBRARY

(Perpustakaan Awam; 4th fl, Limbang Plaza Shopping Mall; ☎9am-5pm Mon-Sat, closed public holidays) The library has an excellent collection of English-language books on Sarawak (on a shelf labelled 'Sarawakiana'). This is a great place to do air-conditioned research before an upcountry trek, especially on a rainy day. Free internet for up to an hour. Situated next to the Purnama Hotel.

🚣 Tours

The following outfits run canoe trips in the Limpaki Wetlands, where you can often see proboscis monkeys, and can take you to the crash site of a **B-34 Liberator** shot down by the Japanese in 1944, and to the salty **Mari-tam Mud Spring** (aka the 'Mud Volcano'), 34km towards BSB.

Chua Eng Hin

SIGHTSEEING, CANOEING

(☎019-8145355; chualbg@streamyx.com) A well-known local personality with a passion for Limbang District's largely unknown charms.

Borneo Touch Ecotour

CANOEING, TREKKING

(☎013-844 3861; www.walk2mulu.com; 1st fl, 2061 Rickett Commercial Bldg) Run by the dynamic Mr Lim (no, Limbang is not named for him), this local company offers highly recommended treks up or down the Headhunters'

CROSSING INTO INDONESIA

Thanks to long-standing cultural and personal ties across the Sarawak-Kalimantan frontier, drawn in colonial times by the British and the Dutch, a local trans-border initiative has made it possible for both Highland residents and tourists to cross from Ba Kelalan into Kalimantan to visit nearby settlements such as Long Bawan, Lembudud and Long Layu. All you need is a *pas lintas batas* (transboundary pass), issued locally according to an agreement signed between the Malaysian and Indonesian foreign ministries. Passports are not stamped and you must return to Sarawak within 14 days. To make arrangements, ask your guide or contact John Tarawe in Bario.

Malaysian ringgits are very popular in this remote part of Kalimantan but US dollars are not.

TREKKING IN THE PENAN HIGHLANDS

Community-based and sustainably managed, **Picnic with the Penan** (www.picnicwiththepenan.org) is a pioneering, non-profit tourism initiative that offers intrepid trekkers a rare chance to visit remote Penan villages in the *ulu-ulu* (back-of-the-beyond) Upper Baram area between the Highland airports of Long Lellang and Long Banga. Itineraries take at least five days and four nights. Booking is by email or through Highlands Backpackers (p435) in Miri.

Trail to/from Gunung Mulu National Park (RM950 per person for three days and two nights, including the Pinnacles; minimum four people).



Sleeping

East Asia Hotel

HOTEL \$

(☎085-215 600; cnr Jln Wong Tsap En & Jln Wayang; d old/new RM45/78; ⓂⓂ) A waterfront hostelry with 33 clean and comfy rooms, eleven of them nicely remodelled; some have river views. Situated four short blocks south of the Purnama Hotel. Room deposit: RM100.

Purnama Hotel

HOTEL \$\$

(☎085-216700; www.purnamalimbang.com; Jln Buangsiol; s/d from RM105/115; ⓂⓂ) Ensnorced in Limbang's tallest building (12 storeys), this uninspiring hotel – ornamented with rainbow-hued balconies – has 218 spacious but aesthetically challenged rooms that come with big views and small bathrooms.



Eating

Pusat Penjaja Medan Bangkita

MARKET \$

(Jln Bangkita; ☎6am or 7am-5pm or 6pm) Bisayah, Lun Bawang and Iban women sell jungle edibles, sausage-shaped Ba Kelalan salt and a dozen kinds of upland rice. The larger weekly *tamu* (market) takes place all-day Thursday and until noon on Friday. From the Purnama Hotel, go one long block inland.

Thien Hsing Vegetarian

CHINESE \$

(mains RM3-4; ☎6.30am-2pm; Ⓜ) A very basic eatery serving veggie Chinese dishes. Situated on a back alley 3½ short blocks south of the Purnama Hotel, right behind Ling Brother Enterprise bike shop at 46 Jln Wayang.

Bangunan Tamu Limbang

HAWKER \$

(Jln Wong Tsap En; mains RM3.50-5; ☎6.30am-5.30pm) Houses Limbang's main Malay market, with an upstairs hawker centre. Diagonally opposite the Purnama Hotel.

Night Markets

FOOD STALLS \$

In the afternoon and evening, food-stall action shifts to the **Malay night market** (☎5pm-midnight), on the riverfront 300m northwest of the Purnama Hotel; and to the **Chinese night market** (Jln Bangkita; ☎2-10pm), a block northeast of the Purnama Hotel.

Information

Limbang has several international ATMs.

Sun City Cybercafe (Jln Bangkita, 1st fl; per hr RM2.50; ☎8.30am-midnight) A haven for gamers. One long block east of the Purnama Hotel, above the Cahaya Delima Cafe.

Getting There & Around

The Sungai Pandaruan ferry between Limbang and Bangar (Brunei), a major bottleneck, should be replaced by a bridge in 2013.

AIR

MASwings (www.maswings.com.my) links Limbang's airport, 7km south of the centre, with Miri. A taxi into town costs RM18.

BOAT

Express ferries from Limbang's immigration hall to Pulau Labuan (RM30, two hours, 8am daily) are run by two companies on alternate days, **Lim Pertama** (☎012-865 3753) and **Royal Limbang** (☎013-882 3736). Departures from Pulau Labuan are at 1.30pm. Bookings can be made by SMS/text message.

BUS

There's a tiny bus station at the eastern end of Jln Wayang, two blocks inland from the river. **Biaramas/Bus Asia** (☎012-828 2042) sends a bus to Miri's Pujut Bus Terminal (RM45, four hours) every day at 9am. A spot in a seven-person van to Miri costs RM50, with departures at around 8.30am and 1pm. The cheapest way to Bandar Seri Begawan (BSB) is to take Syarikat Bus Limbang's 1pm bus to Kuala Lurah (RM5) and then a local Bruneian bus (B\$1).

The only company that can drop you off inside Brunei is **Jesselton Express** (PHLS; ☎in Brunei +673-718-3838, +673-717-7755, +673-719-3835, in KK 016-836 0009, in Limbang

016-855 0222, 085-212990), which has daily buses to BSB (RM20 or B\$10) at 2pm or 3pm; and to Bangar, Lawas (RM30, 2 hours) and Kota Kimabalu (KK; RM50) at 9.30am. Heading to Limbang, a bus departs from BSB every day at 8am. Tickets are sold at **Wan Wan Cafe & Restaurant** (Jln Bangkita).

Bintang Jaya (☎016-859 4532) sends daily buses to Miri (RM45) at 1.45pm, and to Lawas (RM30) and KK (RM50) at 12.30pm. Tickets are sold at **Hock Chuong Hin Cafe** (Jln Bangkita).

TAXI & MINIBUS

Minibuses and red-and-yellow taxis hang out at the **Stesyen Teksi** (☎085-213781; Jln Wong Tsap En; ☀5am-6pm or later), on the waterfront a block south of the Purnama Hotel. If you're heading towards BSB, one-way travel to the Kuala Lurah crossing costs about RM60 (more after 7pm); cheap, frequent local buses can take you from there to BSB. If you're coming from BSB, taxis wait on the Malaysian side of the Kuala Lurah crossing.

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